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Mythic Reinscriptions in
W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*,
James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, and
Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Peter H. Feder

A Thesis

in

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ABSTRACT

Mythic Reinscriptions in
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Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Peter H. Feder

Those mythic structures which have significantly defined and supported the idea of “America” have consistently ignored the contribution, or even the very existence of the American black population. Meaningful participation in the promise of these myths, loosely bound up in the notion of The American Dream, and defined in texts such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, has been systematically denied to America’s black population. W.E.B. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* initiated a vigorous literary attempt to recuperate black self-esteem, to independently fashion black identity, and to create an environment in which blacks and whites could contribute equally in future prosperity and progress. To forward his agenda, Du Bois undertakes a relentless deconstruction of prevalent white American traditional and mythic misconceptions, and imaginatively proposes alternative mythological constructs. This study investigates Du Bois’s representation of the significance of myth to the black experience in America, and the discursive response contained in subsequent African-American texts: namely, in James Weldon Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*.

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Introduction

- Myth: 1. A traditional story, either wholly or partially fictitious, providing an explanation for or embodying a popular idea concerning some natural or social phenomenon or some religious belief or ritual.
2. A widely-held (esp. untrue or discredited) popular story or belief; a misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth; an exaggerated or idealized conception of a person, institution, etc. (O.E.D.)

Since its earliest discovery by European adventurers, America has been inextricably linked to concepts of identity; it constitutes both a place and an idea. As a hegemonic extension of European control, America has been variously claimed and *named* in acts of appropriation and in confirmation of ownership. In its colonial phase, America already enjoyed certain quasi-mythic qualities associated with native treasure, fountains of youth, limitless expanse, and boundless exploitability, all constructions that suggest a sort of pre-Lapsarian heathen wilderness. The portrayal of America in this image had certain advantages. Heathenness encouraged religious conversion, exploitability promoted migration and colonization, fountains of youth gave hope and promise, and the lure of treasure was the engine that drove laissez-faire capitalism. Combined, these elements had important national/political implications. Myth and legend consolidated, undergirded and validated America's identity in both its own eyes and those of its European masters.

Eventually, as in all organic development, and as a result of natural growth and maturity, adolescent America sought independence and the thirteen colonies re-named themselves, to borrow Stephen Greenblatt's phrase, in an act of "self-fashioning." The colonies invoked neo-classical republican ideals, resolving to demarcate themselves in

terms of a set of moral precepts and principles, which were henceforth to be America's defining characteristics. In so doing, the new United States preserved some of the mythic structures which had previously supported notions of America as a site of possibility, and added others which philosophically and intellectually supported America as a concept. These new ideas included those expressed in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and other, more amorphous notions such as Henry Clay's "self-made man" and John O'Sullivan's "manifest destiny." And, all of these concepts were supported and reinforced by such authors as Emerson, Thoreau, Cooper, and Whitman in their production of a new, uniquely American literature, in much the same way that myth and legend has provided culturally meaningful topoi for literatures everywhere.

The idea that myth is central to identity is as old as the opening lines of Genesis, in which the creation and the naming of things takes place. For the purposes of this argument and the succeeding chapters, I view religion as being a particularly strong and overarching myth. But, with differing degrees of emphasis, the language of religion and myth may be seen as both limiting and liberating, both powerful and repressive. Such language lifts up and casts down. If the Israelites are the chosen people of God, the implications for all other peoples are clear. The myth of Ham has been used as a justification for the inferior status of, in W.E.B. Du Bois's words, "the darker races of men" (*Souls* 55), yet other Old Testament texts have provided inspiration to black slaves who saw in themselves a modern reinscription of Jewish bondage with the ultimate promise of freedom and redemption. The limitations of the language of religion are well demonstrated by Ralph Ellison's Barbee-Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man*. As ideological practice, Barbee's sermon

counsels a conservative approach to a solution to the problem of black oppression; as a sort of cautionary tale, the story of Trueblood's life refutes Barbee's underlying notion of progress. If such duality exists within a heterogeneous black community, then the language of myth and religion lends itself to a greatly exacerbated, alternative exegesis when it is applied to situations in which competing societies seek to appropriate these stories to illustrate and validate a hierarchical and oppressive dialectic.

It is the white use and abuse of myth that black writers have sought to counter since significant black spokespersons emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. David Walker's "Appeal" and Frederick Douglass's autobiographies are two examples of attempts to foreground the paradox of a "free," Christian nation engaged in slavery. Subsequently, it has consistently been black writers' double duty to wrest their freedom from oppression in defiant acts of self-definition, and to persuade the white population at large of their inherent right to do so.

In relative terms, it has taken longer for a specifically black literary criticism to be formulated and articulated. Yet, the process of freeing black literature from its traditional confinement within the strictures of modern, European critical theory is an essential component of identity-formation, particularly since structuralist and (marginally less so) post-structuralist literary theory is undergirded by a European sensibility and a European literary aesthetic. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* is generally credited with laying the foundation of black theory; more recently students of black literature have been furnished with innovative interpretive modalities by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Houston A. Baker, Jr. Their theories directly engage with the problematic nature of having to confront

established mythic structures.

The paradox of America, founded on the declarative myth of equality, is well expressed by Baker in *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Literature*. He says:

What has been estranging has been AMERICA. Black and white alike have sustained a literary-critical and literary-theoretical discourse that inscribes (and reinscribes) AMERICA as immanent idea of boundless, classless, raceless possibility in America. The great break with a Europe of aristocratic privilege and division has been filled by virtuoso riffs on AMERICA as egalitarian promise, trembling imminence in the New World.

But the players are always founding (white) fathers, or black men who believe there are only a few more chords to be unnot(ted) before Afro-American paternity is secure—before they are, in Alain Locke's phrases, 'initiated' into American Democracy as 'contributors' to American civilization. Hah! I ain't no stranger, I been here before (65).

Baker's bitter indictment of repeatedly broken promises reflects a movement away from blacks' continuing belief in the governing principles of the American republic. Baker represents that 1970s' shift towards a more "radical" response to black disillusionment, one that proposed a literary, aesthetic, political, and social approach, independent of American historicity. The Black Aesthetic movement broke from those last, significant black writers in America, James Baldwin and Ralph Ellison, who still believed, in the words of Ellison's *Invisible Man*, that blacks

were to affirm the principle on which the country was built and not the men. . . because . . . the principle was greater than the men, greater than the numbers and the vicious power and all the methods used to corrupt its name. . . because we were the heirs who must use the principle because no other fitted our needs. . . [because] we of all, we, most of all, had to affirm the principle, the plan in whose name we had been brutalized and sacrificed . . . because we were older than they, in the sense of what it took to live in the world (433-34).

Baker's theory of black literature seeks to abandon white, American mythic concepts. He identifies governing statements which, in his estimation, are the "essential governing

structures of a traditional American history.” These are “religious man,” “wilderness,” “migratory errand,” “increase in store,” and “New Jerusalem” (19). Baker rejects these structures, which, I would suggest, in aggregate make up the larger myths of the American Dream and Manifest Destiny, and which, to borrow from Foucault, “constitute the tree of derivation of a discourse” (qtd. in Baker 18). Baker repudiates these governing structures in favour of a “non-naive Marxism” and a theoretical literary construct built around tropes of the blues, the railroad and the “economics of slavery” (31). But, if there is any weakness in Baker’s theory, it resides in his attempt to create black symbolic capital out of constructs which are fundamentally white and western (Marx, Foucault, Hayden White, Fredric Jameson), while still arguing for his theory’s independence from western influence. Furthermore, Baker’s theory generally ignores myth in favour of trope, as if the latter could carry the same force and resonance.

Acknowledging their historic significance, Baker identifies the railroad and the blues as loci of movement and aesthetic expression. The railroad, where the blues would often be played by itinerant black workers, serves Baker as a metaphor for inspirational sites of Afro-American cultural intersection. This would be irrefutable if not for the fact that the railroad can equally well be seen as a metaphor for the divergent direction taken by whites and blacks in America since emancipation. For the white, it is an enabler of the American Dream, pushing back the frontier, and constructing a wider reality, leaving all but “progressive” African Americans behind. And, of course, it is the embodiment of technological progress, incorporating notions of investment and return, from which African Americans were excluded, since capital was not one of their advantages.

Baker prefers a construction that favours the railroad as representing a means of escape from a debilitating southern reality, an escape to what was to be a northern New Jerusalem. And yet, in the history of the black experience recorded by writers like Rudolph Fisher, Richard Wright, and Ellison, the New Jerusalem is chimerical and rather suspect. But Baker persists in suggesting that the railroad represented "a meaningful symbol offering both economic progress and the possibility of aesthetic expression" (11). Perhaps a less roseate wording, especially in view of the negativity associated with the railroad as the locus for Jim Crow laws and its ambiguity in being one of the only sources of (menial) employment, would be that it offered a "meaningful symbol. . . of aesthetic expression" but only the meagerest *possibility* of economic progress.

Baker de-emphasizes myth in favour of a materialist dialectic, and is challenged by Gates who, with Robert Stepto and Eric Sundquist, proposes a vernacular theory of black literature that concentrates on the subversive resistance inherent in "signifyin(g)." But Gates goes further and, unlike Baker's, Gates's theory seeks to replace essentially white American mythological constructs of identity and positionality with alternative, complementary structures relevant to both the black, American experience, and to a historical continuum that rejects an American *originary* state for blacks in favour of one that identifies Africa as the literal and figurative point of departure. In some ways, as Sandra Adell suggests, Gates is like Wole Soyinka, who makes elaborate use of Nietzsche's notion of myth; she argues that "both Gates and Soyinka must have recourse to 'mythic truth' in order to respond to the twin experiences of slavery and colonization and the cultural heritage left in their wake" (132). According to Soyinka,

man exists in a comprehensive world of myth, history and mores; [and the African world] possesses. . . in common with other cultures, the virtues of complementarity. To ignore this simple route to a common humanity and pursue the alternative route of negation is, for whatever motives, an attempt to perpetuate external subjugation (xii).

This notion of complementarity is a core issue for Du Bois, who, as we shall see in chapter one, vigorously employs mythic constructs in the active pursuit of a desired fusion of two *equal* cultures in the construction of a future America.

Gates's theory seeks to formalize the ways in which Du Bois's and other literary discourses may be interpreted. Gates draws upon the practices of hermeneutics, in which *Esu-tufunaalo* "unravels the knots of Esu" and becomes tropological locum for "the study of methodological principles of interpretation of a text" (8-9). He also draws on rhetoric. His rhetorical figure is the Signifying Monkey, "who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language, [s/he] is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus, repeating and revising as he does in one deft discursive act" (52).

The Yoruba Esu represents that alternative, complementary, offering a mythic structure so important to African Americans if they are to be able to escape 300 years of what Franz Boas calls "entrapment by convention" (87) and to achieve a self-fashioned identity instead of that "double-consciousness" Du Bois describes as the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (*Souls* 3). As important as the creation of black pride – the pride inherent in the transcendence of a world-view defined by America – might be, so too is the deconstruction of existing, defining mythologies. Du Bois understands this dual necessity very well, and Gates, following Du Bois, offers the

Signifying Monkey as the figure who can enable the two enterprises: as the trickster, the Signifying Monkey revises and reverses what Victor Turner describes as “structural inferiority” (505). Clearly, it is insufficient to seek accommodation by merely tinkering with existing cultural structures. This was proposed by Booker T. Washington, and, though it was largely accepted in the black community between 1895 and 1915, such accommodation has subsequently been recognized as a maintaining of the status quo wherein blacks “suffer from externally induced fantasies of redemptive transformation *in the image of alien masters*” (Soyinka xii, my emphasis). The continued, unquestioned acceptance of foundational, American mythic structures, or the allowing of such structures to be perverted so that one group is disadvantaged, does nothing to promote a positive, black-generated identity; on the contrary, such acceptance perpetuates subordination, because of “the wholly or partially fictitious” (O.E.D.) nature of myth. Claude Lévi-Strauss explains this process:

Myth is certainly related to given facts, but not as a *representation* of them. The relationship is of a dialectic kind, and the institutions described in myths can be the very opposite of the real institutions. This will always be the case when the myth is trying to express a negative truth (478).

Such negative truths of the more blatant kind are easy to find in the Ku-Klux Klan fiction of, say, Thomas Dixon, Jr. Less superficially damning, but far more insidious, are representations of the “happy, shuffling darky” of Plantation mythology. And still more pernicious has been the compromise of those “principle[s] on which the country was built” (*IM* 433), by ruling after ruling of the U.S. Supreme Court, which has systematically negated the spirit and intent of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution,

thereby rendering them truly mythical in nature.

Appropriating freely from Susan Gubar, I would argue that American “culture is steeped in . . . myths of [white] primacy in theological, artistic and scientific creativity” (293). Yet, remarkably, significant African-American writers have continued to support the position, articulated by Lloyd W. Brown, that the black in America is the “child-heir to the American dream-legacy of freedom, equality, and individual fulfilment” (18). It seems that, despite everything, Claude McKay’s America maintains its magical hold on the black imagination: “Although [America] feeds me bread of bitterness, / And sinks into my throat her tiger’s tooth, / Stealing my breath of life, I will confess / I love this cultured hell that tests my youth!” (518).

It is in literature that we find the most trenchant analyses of those myths by which society seeks to define itself – or define others. And in the ensuing chapters, I will examine three important African American texts. Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* is recognized by every major black literary theorist and critic as a foundational text in black letters. In the first chapter of this thesis, I focus on Du Bois’s particular emphasis on the importance of myth to his project of American cultural synthesis. Du Bois provides persuasive arguments to support Wilson Moses’s premise that “the most convincing proof of an ethnic group’s cultural health is its ability to sustain a myth of its history and destiny” (i). In the second chapter, I read James Weldon Johnson’s *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* as an imaginative response to Du Bois – a response to the dilemma of double-consciousness and its attendant problem of identity. In his quest for a stable identity, and his ironic articulation of the desire to reconcile the two “warring ideals” of

black and white, Johnson's protagonist fails to identify any authenticity in either. He rejects those essentializing tendencies which, as Melville Herscovits suggests, tend to polarize cultural differences into racial ones. Finally, chapter three explores the discursive response to both Du Bois and Johnson offered by Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Ellison questions perceptions of appearance and reality by interrogating those mythic structures which contribute to their blurring.

All three writers present their works as quasi-autobiographies – as narratives that look back generically to the tradition of resistance articulated by preceding slave-narrators. But Du Bois, Johnson, and Ellison also do something more. They engage in acts of self-creation and authentication through literacy, and they demonstrate what John Dewey describes as an abiding “faith in the power of intelligence to imagine a future which is the projection of the desirable in the present, and to invent the instrumentality of its realization” (48).

Chapter 1

Thesis, Antithesis and Synthesis: Du Bois and the Challenges Imposed by Myth on *The Souls of Black Folk*

In the period from 1864, when the Emancipation Act was passed, to 1903, when W.E. Burghardt Du Bois published *The Souls of Black Folk*, each year had significant impact on the American black community. Northern troops continued to occupy the defeated South until 1876, and northern administrative institutions, such as the Freedman's Bureau, sought, with mixed success, to ameliorate the condition of southern blacks. Certainly, the dream of "forty acres and a mule" for every southern black remained unfulfilled, as did the promises of improved civil rights and education, despite the heroic efforts of many northern volunteer educators. After the withdrawal of the Yankee army, which had stood between embittered southern white landowners and their former slaves, a backlash of violence and oppression, legal and otherwise, led to the virtual re-enslavement of the southern black population through peonage, share-cropping practices, and convict labour. Inevitably under such circumstances, the issue of what was to be done and the ancillary question of leadership assumed increasing importance. Both before and after the Civil War, Frederick Douglass had emerged as the principle spokesperson for the black community and its aspirations, and his inspirational life story and life offered a metaphor for realizable potential. Though *every* year had significant impact on the black community, the year 1895, in particular, represented a watershed in the historical development of the relationship of blacks to whites, and their respective positions within the framework of

America.

In 1895 Douglass – whom Du Bois described as the “greatest of American Negro leaders” (*Souls* 49) – died, and a living legend became a dead hero imbued with mythic stature. A leadership vacuum was created, and with it the potential for new myths to be fashioned. Undoubtedly aware of the void waiting to be filled, Booker T. Washington opportunistically gave an address at the Atlanta Exposition later in the same year, in which he outlined his vision of black “uplift” through industrial/ technical/domestic training, and in which he enlisted white northern and southern support in return for placing black demands for civil rights on the back burner. For Du Bois: “Mr Washington represents in Negro thought the old attitude of adjustment and submission. . . and practically accepts the alleged inferiority of the Negro races” (*Souls* 50). A sort of neo-Moses who rose to lead his people into prosperity, Washington came armed with money, influence, connections (with the likes of industrialist Andrew Carnegie and others) and an institution, Tuskegee, to set his philosophy in motion. His “accommodation” speech appealed to northern industrialists as a means of securing a trained (and docile) labour force, appealed to southern whites as a confirmation of the limits imposed on black potential, and appealed to the black masses as a *workable, practical* solution to what had appeared to be the insoluble problem of lack of opportunity. But it did not appeal to black intellectuals, who perceived in Washington’s program and personal self-aggrandisement a double threat to black integrity.

The black intelligentsia’s first problem with Washington’s program was its reconsolidation of black vulnerability to white exploitation; the second problem was

philosophical and metaphysical in nature. In response to the first problem, Du Bois carefully articulated in *The Souls of Black Folk* the paradox of seeking to elevate a people without, at the same time, providing them with the means to protect that elevation: “Washington distinctly asks that black people give up, at least for the present political power. . . insistence on civil rights. . . [and] higher education of Negro youth.” Du Bois asks: “is it possible, and probable, that nine millions of men can make effective progress in economic lines if they are deprived of political rights, made a servile caste, and allowed only the most meagre chances for developing their exceptional men?” (51).

The second problem, and one which I believe to be at the heart of *The Souls of Black Folk*, is Du Bois’s perception of Washington’s attempt to assume Douglass’s mantle, and to create an uplift mythology which, if allowed to remain unchecked, could have incalculable consequences to the future development of blacks in America. The 1901 publication of Washington’s autobiography, *Up From Slavery*, suggests that he sought to position himself in the mode of black resistance and protest by appropriating the slave-narrative tradition. But, far from echoing what Du Bois identifies as Douglass’s principle precepts of “self-assertion and self-development,” Washington’s narrative, as Robert Stepto argues, “does not ultimately become an autobiography, [thereby offering] a formal clue that the text is preoccupied with subtler intentions” (35). These “subtler intentions” are identified by Stepto, who credits Washington with yoking uplift to Tuskegee; Stepto suggests that Washington created an institution that, as “a system of signification,” became a myth in Barthesian terms – a “text, most certainly of the cultural and quite probably of a literary variety.” According to Stepto: “Washington portrays himself with

great indirection and care as a practical man imbued with the very American philosophy of which his particular myth of uplift is an extension” (37). Consequently, far from being a self-authenticating document – a validation of self-fashioned, *personal* identity in the mode of resistance employed in the slave narratives – *Up From Slavery* “authenticates Washington’s greatest public statement [The Atlanta Address] by contextualizing it not so much in cultural or autobiographical history as in the history of his increasingly *personal control* of the myth of uplift” (Step 45, my emphasis).

The developing indissolubility of Washington, the man, and Washington, the presiding figure charged with the responsibility of maintaining and forwarding an enterprise of mythic proportions, and the consequent, inevitable blurring of the line between mortal and hero, represent the crux of the second problem faced by Du Bois. Where uplift strategy, political participation and educational principles were concerned, Du Bois was able to identify the flaws and weaknesses in Washington’s arguments and counter them with persuasive alternatives. But, Du Bois’s task became infinitely more difficult when he was obliged to dismantle an idea seemingly anchored in and legitimated by literary antecedents and cultural tradition, especially since Washington’s propositions were, firstly, easy to understand and therefore widely accepted, and, secondly, already shrouded in artfully constructed mythic terms which rendered them almost sacrosanct.

Though *The Souls of Black Folk* is by no means limited to the pursuit of one overarching purpose, it is, I believe, central to Du Bois’s project to counter Washington’s increasing *personal* popularity (his “living legend” status), to counter Washington’s particular myth of uplift, and to replace accommodation with a new vision of assimilation

in which blacks and whites contribute and cooperate as equal partners for a future America. These goals could, I would suggest, only be achieved by Du Bois's presenting of a coherent account of the black experience, replete with his own concept of a mythic structure on which it was possible both to draw from the past and to build for the future. It certainly follows that, in the delicate process of making (and breaking) contemporary mythologies, Du Bois had to consider the interests of both sides of the colour-line. In so doing he had several important acts to perform. He had to select and reject white American mythology, and he had to cull from the black-American cultural heritage those rituals, stories, and persons whose example would further his project. Finally, in keeping with the notion of collaboration between equals, Du Bois set out first to recuperate and elevate undervalued contributions (some anchored in African retentions) made by blacks to mainstream American culture, and then to expand the white cultural heritage beyond the narrow confines of a strictly American context to include ancient and recent European mythology.

In selecting those myths of America that could be resuscitated for their intrinsic value, those that could enhance the spirit of solidarity, Du Bois draws heavily upon the ideas set forth in the Declaration of Independence and the principles of the American Republic, in which he still had an abiding faith. If Du Bois's political goals were "freedom of opportunity," "the power of the ballot," and access to everything in American life which was available to whites, then those American myths that had insinuated themselves into the very fabric of white American expectations could be usefully appropriated by blacks as well. Du Bois couched these goals in the rhetoric of the American Revolution, believing

that, without relinquishing their black culture, Negroes should strive for self-development “in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics both so sadly lack.” He added that “there are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes” (11). He begins, in essence, where the abolitionist movement left off, adapting the revolutionary tradition of 1776 to the black experience.

Those white myths of America that Du Bois sought to reject and unseat, were those that worked against a collaborative, inter-racial program and perpetuated racial stereotypes: the Plantation myths, and the Leatherstocking and Horatio Alger myths of the frontier man and the self-made man respectively, which promote the individual over the collective, and foster competition rather than cooperation. In fact, an entire chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk*, “Of the Wings of Atalanta,” is devoted to cautioning readers against the unhealthy lure of Mammonism, warning that “Atlanta must not lead the South to dream of prosperity as the touchstone of all success” (78). In a plea for higher ideals and a further attack on the misdirection of Public School’s vocationalist “habit of interpreting the world in dollars,” Du Bois proposes that “the true college will ever have one goal, – not to earn meat, but to know the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes” (82).

To pick and choose from those readily identifiable and available mythologies, to foreground some and to suppress others, while useful, cannot entirely satisfy the twin imperatives of instilling a new found race-pride in blacks or persuading whites to accept blacks as full partners in a new joint venture. After all, these beliefs had either been present

in the culture of America for some time, or were quickly incorporated as though they had been. By far the most daunting task for Du Bois was to fashion an entirely new way of looking at contributions by blacks and whites to the fabric of America, and to elevate them to a place on par with one another. *The Souls of Black Folk* necessarily testifies to both Du Bois's success and failure in the enterprise.

As a gifted intellectual, able to negotiate the currents of modern American and Romantic European thought, Du Bois marshalled the forces of history, sociology, ethnography, autobiography, fiction, education, economics, biography and the "Sorrow Songs" in order to (re)define the Negro in America. Within *The Souls of Black Folk*, this definition/redefinition occurs on two fronts: on the particular, in terms of Du Bois himself, and on the general, in terms of the Negro community's relation to the dominant white society. He needed to define himself publicly if he was to achieve personal credibility as a legitimate representative of Negro aspirations (with both his black *and* white audiences). And he needed to re-represent the Negro community if its members were to succeed in breaking the mould into which they had been forced by political, legal and social sanctions. Logically, this process of redefinition should take place *concurrently* with the creation of mythic structures that undergird and validate the newly expressed defining characteristics of a people. The multi-valent task Du Bois set himself was complicated by the fact that there was no particular demand for a reformulation of the complex nature of black/white relations among either the white population, who was satisfied with the status quo, or the black population at large (with the exception of an intellectual elite), who already had what it believed were workable solutions to the "problem of the Twentieth Century. . . the

problem of the color-line” (13). That Du Bois intended *The Souls of Black Folk* to be a tool for re-education is consistent with both Du Bois’s academic proclivities and his exhortation to the reader to “receive [his] little book. . . *studying* [his] words. . . and seeking the grain of truth *hidden* there” (vii, my emphasis). In studying Du Bois’s text we must examine the problems he identifies as having to be overcome for his endeavour to be successful, and follow the process by which he leads to the core of his project. This requires an understanding of the structure Du Bois imposes on his work, and an appreciation of how and why Du Bois appropriates both modified African-American ritual and tradition, and European mythic structures.

For Du Bois, the “color-line” is spatial, as in the Georgia Black Belt, legal, as in the 1896 “equal but *separate*” Supreme Court ruling in *Plessey vs. Ferguson* and the Jim Crow laws that preceded and followed it, and, in particular, conceptual, as in the hierarchical relationship perpetuated by the dominant white society. This concept of what it is to be black in America is summarized by Du Bois in his now famous statement of double-consciousness, in which the Negro inhabits

a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (3).

With this in mind, Du Bois expresses both the group consciousness and his own individual aspiration to reconcile the great paradox of blackness in America:

One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. . . . The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife,--this longing to attain self-conscious

manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face (4).

These quotations from *The Souls of Black Folk* reveal the essence of the problem Du Bois identifies, a Janus-faced look at the past and the future. Explicit is the necessity for a re-fashioning of the traditional black community's vision of itself, and the development of race-pride. Implicit is the need for a cooperative national venture to provide blacks full future access to American opportunity. But, as I suggested earlier, a further problem faced by Du Bois is his own ambiguous position as both a black man and a man saturated with Western culture and European sensibility. Stephen Butterfield argues that Du Bois's problem is symptomatic:

In the second period of black autobiography, a new dilemma has crept into the old one of double identity: as the individual author succeeds in the white world by virtue of his outstanding abilities, he is more and more removed from the black masses. . . and at the same time he can never wholly enter the white American mainstream because of his colour (47).

Consequently, Du Bois's invitation to his audience to embark on a journey of discovery within *The Souls of Black Folk* is as much a journey *shared* with as it is a journey led by Du Bois, despite the fact that he seeks to legitimize his role as guide by rhetorically asking whether he need "add that I who speak here am bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh of them that live within the Veil?" (viii).¹ The question is self-reflexive: his audience is well aware of Du Bois's origins. But the question serves to remind Du Bois himself that in America cosmopolitanism, education and even Europhilism do not wash white the skin of a black man, and that his accomplishments alienate him from full

participation on *either* side of the colour-line. Rather than simply showing the reader the black experience, Du Bois must leave "the white world. . . [step] within the Veil, raising it that [*he*] may view faintly its deeper recesses" (viii). In order to "step within the Veil" Du Bois travels south, reversing the slave-narrative trope of the movement north, in what Robert Stepto describes as "the first substantial immersion narrative in the tradition [of African-American literature]" (53).

Du Bois's immersion is both actual and ritual, and he blends his personal experience with his training as a social scientist in order to address the problem of his own position as a race-leader, the problem of race-pride, the problem of inter-racial co-operation, and the problem of constructing an overarching mythic paradigm to somehow solve those problems. Consequently, Du Bois organizes *The Souls of Black Folk* as a hybrid of the traditional first-person slave autobiography, the third-person essay into which Du Bois inserts himself, and the short story. The text consists of the title, the dedication, The Forethought, The Afterthought and, in between, fourteen discrete chapters, ten of which were "altered and extended"(viii) versions of more abbreviated essays that had been previously published. Structurally, the book may be said to deal thematically with an overview of freedom and the issue of black leadership in chapters 1-3, a continued discussion of leadership and education in chapters 4-6, the topography, agronomy and economy of the postwar south in chapters 7-9, and a contemplation of the meaning of black culture "within the Veil" in chapters 10-14. Finally, "before each chapter. . .stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs" (viii), and a further epigraph, drawn from the canon of English (and, in one case, German) literature, appears above the bar of music.

Each chapter may be read independently, for each deals with specific aspects of Negro life. And, although each chapter individually provides a range of possible interpretations, the cumulative effect of the chapters artfully directs the reader toward the conclusion that Du Bois sets out to achieve; namely, the invigoration of an independent black voice.

This rather simple description omits a fundamental aspect of Du Bois's overall strategy, which seeks to collapse time and space. Du Bois's autobiographical voice shifts along not a temporal but a developmental axis along which he traces and conflates both his own personal history and that of the black folk, making their coincidence historically and contemporaneously significant. Moreover, as William Andrews observes,

the very act of telling events removes them from mere factuality and transforms them into variable, fictional speech acts. It is not surprising, then, that the classic standards of identity and truth have now become two shifting elements in a scene of a complex discursive encounter presided over by a self-determined narrator who makes free with text and reader in the name of truth to self (2).

In *The Souls of Black Folk* the chapter "Of the Coming of John" carries such fictional speech acts to the extreme. It is hard not to recognize in the character of John Jones a distorted image of Du Bois himself.

Given the fact that *The Souls of Black Folk* cannot be reduced to a series of expository or argumentative essays by virtue of the inclusion of such fictional speech acts, and given the problematic nature of the autobiographical genre, it is difficult to contain and restrict the text generically.² I suggest that this eclectic construction reflects Du Bois's desire not to be constrained, and, on a broader scale, it enacts a sort of liberation from the conventional expectation that African American literary production is almost exclusively autobiographical narrative. To that extent, Du Bois's work opens a space for

the expansion of artistic expression to include genres not previously explored by blacks in America, a space subsequently rapidly filled by James Weldon Johnson, Jean Toomer, and the later writers of the Harlem Renaissance. The artistic freedom claimed by Du Bois also opens the way for the imaginative re-inscription of mythological constructs which are to be found, without exception, in all fourteen of the chapters of *The Souls of Black Folk*.

The process of elevating the mundane to the sublime begins with a dedication to family: "To Burghardt and Yolande, the Lost and the Found." The meaning of the dedication becomes clear only towards the end of the book, particularly after "Of the Passing of the First Born." The death of Du Bois's young child becomes a symbolic and ritual space for a discussion of the loss of potential, the loss of innocence, and the gain of transcendental freedom found in a movement from the past to the future, from birth through life and death.³ On the birth of Burghardt, Jr., Du Bois views his child as the living embodiment of that future fusion of the races in harmonious compromise, "with his *olive*-tinted flesh and dark *gold* ringlets, his eyes of *mingled blue and brown*" (my emphasis). But, ominously, surrounded by the "hot red soil of Georgia," such racial hybridization is not yet possible, "and thus in the Land of the Color-line [he] saw, as it fell across [his] baby, the shadow of the Veil," stifling that potential of "a hope not hopeless but unhelpful." Yet, despite the constraints of living "and seeing with those bright wondering eyes. . . a land whose freedom is a mockery to us and whose liberty a lie," the child grew "sturdy and masterful. . . filled with bubbling life, so tremulous with the unspoken wisdom of a [child]" (208-9). Du Bois "mused over his little white bed; saw the strength of [his] own arm stretched onward through the ages through the newer strength

of his [child's]; saw the dream of [his] black fathers stagger a step onward" (210).

Conflating the literal, and the figurative history of his race – and, one could add, with the benefit of hindsight, demonstrating extraordinary predictive abilities – Du Bois goes on to describe how his child “died at eventide,” and with him died that “wondering thoughtfulness” of one who knew no color-line and in whose “world walked souls alone, uncolored and unclothed” (212-13). But, the inability to realize potential does not inhere “naturally” to the race (and Du Bois represents the perfect example) any more than the untimely death of a child is considered a “natural” event. The development of the race is prematurely stifled by the unnatural limitations placed upon it by the lack of higher education. Du Bois conflates the cradle of his child with the cradle of his people who “line the alleys of the nation sit[ting] fatherless. . . in whose ear[s] Wisdom wait[s] to speak.” Finally, Du Bois asks: “If one must have gone, why not I? Why may I not rest me from this restlessness and sleep from this wide waking?” (214). If we as readers are to supply the answer, then we may perhaps suppose that Du Bois has been spared to become a wise father to all the rest, outlining the short history of American blacks from their creation as a slave population to their rebirth as emancipated in 1864, and their subsequent prevention from maturing into an adult population. This history is metaphorically presented in “The Passing of the First Born,” which, despite its poignancy, does present some hope, if not concrete alternatives, for “surely there shall yet dawn some mighty morning to lift the Veil and set the prisoned free” (213).⁴

What preoccupies Du Bois, here, are the historical antecedents leading to a *de facto* re-enslavement, thanks to the continuing complicity of black leadership in limiting

black freedom. From out of the alembic of his life, Du Bois must distil a refined affiliation between himself and his folk, credible to himself, his people, and his white audience, without which his self-fashioned authority cannot be maintained. The language of “Of the Passing of the First Born” positions Du Bois firmly in the tradition of the African American preacher, whose allusion to biblical themes is immediately recognizable as a strategic device which resonates deeply within the Negro community. Moreover, this chapter’s language speaks directly to the more immediate heroic struggle for freedom in America and places both Du Bois and his son’s tragic death in the context of a messianic vision – a vision in which the triumvirate of Father, Son, and Spirit are unmistakable, and re-engage the themes explored in the first chapter, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” in which Du Bois begins to create a personal mythology.

In “Of Our Spiritual Strivings,” prefaced by a bar from “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen,” Du Bois begins by placing himself at the centre of his project: “Between me and the other world there is ever an unasked question. . . . How does it feel to be a problem?” Now situated within the “problem,” he recalls that when he “was a little thing, away up in the hills of New England. . . . the shadow [of the Veil] swept across [him]” (2). Du Bois goes on to outline the *bildungsroman* of a man: disclosing his longing, his ambition not to be limited and to meaningfully contribute to the advancement of his people through his own personal success, differentiating himself from “other black boys [whose] strife was not so sunny,” and thereby implicitly placing himself within the ranks of the “talented tenth,” that “advanced guard” who toiled “up the new path” (3).

This picture of personal growth and development, as yet half-formed and

immature, is conflated with the arrested *bildungsroman* of a people whose history “is the history of . . . this longing to attain self-conscious manhood” (4) in their development, which changed “the child of Emancipation to the youth with dawning self-consciousness, self-realization, self-respect” (8). But the attainment of further progress is hampered by the white imposition of a Manichean structure, “inculcat[ing] disdain for everything black, from Toussaint to the devil” (10), by the disenfranchisement of black voters (for, without the vote, “what shall save us from a second slavery?”), by the lack of educational opportunity or the feeble presence of an educational system that was “over-simple and incomplete,” and did not include training of “the broader, deeper, higher culture of gifted minds and pure hearts.” “Work, culture, liberty,” says Du Bois, “all these we need, not singly but together,” fostering “the ideal of human brotherhood. . . in large conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic” (11).

Finally, the opening chapter anticipates what is later to become the central premise of *The Souls of Black Folk*, and the appropriated methodology through which Du Bois seeks boldly to achieve his cultural agenda. In the matter of his central premise, he reminds the American people of the contributions *already made* by Negroes, offering a reversal of the image of the colonial bringing gifts (of no value?):

We the darker ones come even now not altogether empty-handed: there are today no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folk-lore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness (11-12).

And Du Bois’s reference to “*Sturm und Drang*” (10) suggests that he is invoking the paradigm of the German Romantic movement in terms of *Kulturbildung*. In other words,

the assertion of the cultural value of Negro contributions allows for the adoption of a program in America similar to that inaugurated by Johannes Herder in Germany.

Herder's musings on the lack of a German Shakespeare, and the extent to which a national "Shakespeare" artistically performs the political function of instilling national pride and a heightened sense of a shared community, gave rise to a late-eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century visionary concept. This concept suggested that the recuperation of immediately recognizable, resonant folk materials (myths, legends, stories, fairy tales) in the production of new, culturally-specific art media, would infuse the population with national/ethnic pride. Goethe and Schiller rose to the challenge and produced work recognized for its artistic achievement and cultural importance. The artistic and political history of Germany from the beginning of the nineteenth century (the unification of Germany under Bismarck and Wagner's operatic output, to name two examples) suggests that Herder's vision was justified. Du Bois was intimately familiar with these events, and his complicated psychic responses to them, as Paul Gilroy suggests,

require comprehension of such difficult and complex questions as W.E.B. Du Bois's childhood interest in Bismarck, his investment in modelling his dress and moustache on that of Kaiser Wilhelm II, his likely thoughts while sitting in Heinrich Von Treitschke's seminars, and the use his tragic heroes [John Jones, for example] make of European culture (17).

Obviously, Du Bois's interest in German renaissance politics, history and culture predates (and perhaps led to) his studies in Germany.

The *Sturm und Drang* movement had a nation-building, and, in that sense, an exclusionary thrust. Though, on the one hand, such a model would serve Du Bois well in terms of instilling race-pride, on the other hand, it was potentially at odds with the ideal of

a *shared* cultural heritage, in which the best of Negro accomplishments and the highest of Western culture would contribute equally in the future. He was, therefore, obliged to widen the scope of “nation” to include both races. However, Du Bois borrows from the German Romantics that organicism associated with their movement in the rhetorically organic development of his arguments in *The Souls of Black Folk*. He cultivates the germinal intimation of his thrust (in *The Forethought*), to the slow budding of his first chapter – containing as it does all the seeds of autobiography, history, sociology, economics, education, leadership, the Negro church, a biography of one who typifies the “talented tenth,” and the “gifts,” including the music, the sorrow songs of the African-American – to the full flowering of his presentation in the ensuing chapters. This strategy beautifully underscores a programme for the uplift and cultivation of a people whose “Spiritual Strivings” can only be satisfied by nourishing the soul, the body, *and* the mind. The irony of the title is muted by the emphasis placed on the required convergence of these three areas of necessary cultivation, and Du Bois's choice of “Nobody Knows the Trouble I Seen” as the sorrow song epigraph to this section clearly anchors his aspirations, and those whom he seeks to lead, in the mundane here-and-now and not in the “Faith of the Fathers,” from which he distances himself personally and rhetorically.

In “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” Du Bois yields to his autobiographical impulses and abandons for the moment his posture as social scientist. He takes up the narrative of his life and leaves behind the Berkshires of his childhood and youth. For Du Bois, the Berkshires is a ritual space in which his personal self-consciousness as a black child was awakened – a space that simultaneously held promise for the future (his dreams and the

birth of his son) and the shadow of the Veil, expressed in the rejection of his name-card by a white girl and the knowledge of unrealized potential in the death of his son. In a reversal of the archetypal slave narrative, Du Bois travels south, as a young “country school-teacher. . . fresh from the East” (189), not in search of liberty, but in a search for literacy.⁵ Moreover, Du Bois’s is specifically a search for semiotic significance in black ritual language, and its significance to both *communitas* and his personal leadership. “What are these dreams to foolish babbling men/Who cry with little noises ’neath the thunder” (189), is the epigraph by Fiona Macleod chosen by Du Bois to head this chapter.

The acquisition of the literature of the black pulpit, the ways in which meaning is made out of Biblical myth, and the interpretation of these myths by the black masses as a means to understanding the larger forces ranged against them, are of special significance to Du Bois. Black evangelism is a natural entrée to the communal psyche of the black “nation” and one Du Bois needs to tap into to harness the forces of those “thousand thousand souls” he wishes to elevate. Admitting first to having had “very quiet and subdued” (190) expressions of faith in Berkshire, Du Bois details the impact of a “Southern Negro revival” – “a scene of passion such as [he] had never conceived before” (189-190). In effect, he outlines a moment of communion, attempting to confirm and reinforce that special racial connection he has with the black masses, despite his economic, educational and geographic remove. Yet, no sooner does he enter the personal world of his recollections than he abandons it in favour of a masterfully detached sociological exposition. Why?

Several possible explanations present themselves when one is negotiating “Of the

Faith of the Fathers,” which is arguably the most complex chapter in the text. Firstly, as I suggested, Du Bois’s journey is very much one of discovery, *shared* by both author and audience; furthermore, that journey is not simply emotional, detailing visceral responses to pragmatic reality. Secondly, for *The Souls of Black Folk* to be successful as a vehicle for change, it must address all sides of the Veil – not just the black and white but all the gradations, including caste, class and disposition. Consequently, Du Bois addresses “those who have not thus witnessed the frenzy of a Negro revival in the untouched backwoods of the South [and] can but dimly realize the religious feeling *of the slave*” (190, my emphasis). For both whites and the “better classes [of blacks who] segregate themselves from the group-life of both white and black, and form an aristocracy” (205) it is necessary to situate such religious fervour within a historical continuum. That is to say, that such religious expression is at once central to and transcends the slave experience and contemporary black reality. Black religion serves as a bridge between past and present and mediates between experiences of the then and now, the mundane and the divine, the black and the white worlds. To remove the nature of devotion from the present moment, Du Bois establishes an ironic distance between the impact of his experience and its transformation into something else in order to imbue religious practice with mythic qualities, to interrogate the church’s leadership (and its tacit support of Washingtonian uplift), and to expand upon the theme of the “Sorrow Songs.”

To imbue the practice with a mythic quality equivalent to religions as old “as Delphi and Endor” (191), and to instill and confirm a race-pride in “scenes [which might] appear grotesque and funny” but “as seen are awful” (190), Du Bois creates a nexus in

history from which he can logically move backwards and forwards. He locates the origins of contemporary black religious practices in pre-slavery (in African *ursprung*), thereby demonstrating that “slavery” is not an originary state and melding mythical and ontological realities. Drawing on Frans Boas, Du Bois points out that the “social history of the Negro did not start in America. He was brought from a definite social environment,” one which Du Bois briefly sketches and reincorporates into the slave experience in the form of “the interpreter of the Unknown and the supernatural avenger of wrong” (195-96) – a figure familiar to readers of the exploits of the “conjure-man” in the short stories of Charles Chesnutt.

Obviously, if Du Bois wishes, among other things, to change contemporary perceptions, such a strategy is essential. This emphasis on a pre-American past has subsequently been emulated by a host of writers and critics, including Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*, and it is certainly useful to remember that typical pre-Du Boisian slave narratives have no origins, no beginning in any familial sense that includes birth or a pre-birth history. Du Bois asks (and leaves the reader to supply her/his answers): “What did slavery mean to the African. . . ? What was his attitude toward the World and Life? What seemed to him good and evil, – God and Devil? Whither went his longings and strivings, and wherefore were his heart-burnings and disappointments?” (192) Du Bois goes on to maintain that the “Negro church of to-day is the social centre of Negro life in the United States, and the most characteristic expression of *African* character” (193, my emphasis). But that church is not Du Bois's. Both in this chapter and in “The Passing of the First Born,” the power of religion is presented as a force to be harnessed by astute leadership

rather than followed in submission. In fact, in the lengthy discussion which follows, Du Bois adopts a posture repudiating a perverted Christianity in much the same way that Douglass does in his *Narrative*. Moving forward, on the temporal axis that he has created, Du Bois demonstrates that, in the conversion of the African to the Christian by slaveholders, “courtesy became humility, moral strength degenerated into submission, and the exquisite native appreciation of the beautiful became an infinite capacity for dumb suffering” (199). If “deep religious fatalism” produced “laziness,” “indulgence and crime,” “habits of shiftlessness and sullen hopelessness,” then the source of a re-awakened race-pride and a return to those values and characteristics embodied in the pre-slavery African must be found elsewhere than in religion. But where? Certainly not in the “Jesuitic casuistry. . . deterred by no ethical considerations” of Booker T. Washington, who “forgets that life is more than meat and the body more than raiment” (203).

“The Faith of the Fathers” takes on a curious ambiguity when its focus shifts towards Du Bois’s most strident condemnation of submission to a new and dangerous credo of earthly compromise. The language of the preacher – “Children we shall all be free/When the Lord shall appear” (203) – has been translated into another form of submission to practical exigency, the ultimate aim of which is to defer *indefinitely* the participation of Negroes in the *full* panoply of American culture, and to deny them the means of expressing their own, by placing their faith in a *surrogate* father and his “hypocritical compromise” (203). The Negro church, “warily avoiding unpleasant questions both within and without the black world, and preaching in effect if not in word: *Dum vivimus, vivamus*,” is therefore unwilling or incapable of providing leadership to “the

real Negro heart, [in which stirs] the unguided might of powerful human souls who have lost the guiding star of the past and are seeking in the great night a new religious ideal” (206).

Thus, Du Bois expands “The Faith of the Fathers” to include the faith of the past fathers of those who were first enslaved in Africa, the faith of the present fathers who witnessed emancipation and placed their continued trust in the language of a Christian church of post-slavery submission and humility, and the faith of the future fathers who will perhaps be free of such submission. The acquisition of the language of the Negro masses, and the understanding of the ways in which it has been translated both by the church and by political opportunism, open the way for Du Bois to reinterpret and “signify” upon the semiotics of cultural ritual, both black *and* white, and foreshadow a time when, with (Du Bois’s) proper guidance, “the pent-up vigor of ten million souls shall sweep irresistibly toward the Goal, out of the Valley of the Shadow of Death, where all that makes life worth living – Liberty, Justice, and Right – is marked ‘For White People Only’” (206).

Found within the complex arrangement of “The Faith of the Fathers,” closely bound to, and a product of, that “real Negro heart” quoted above, “the Music of Negro religion. . . still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil: the ‘Sorrow Songs’” (191). The bar of music as epigraph to this chapter is “Steal Away,” the lyrics of which easily warrant concentrated and separate attention elsewhere. Here, the special position of this inspired musical art-form to Du Bois’s project should be addressed. As Eric Sundquist points out:

In the sorrow songs, which both frame and carry forward the most resonant arguments of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois discovered a deep spiritual

intonation for his cultural voice, one that would vivify his writing. . . and make his work unique in its blending of poetics and politics, what he would eventually refer to as the necessary union of art and propaganda (459).

Moreover, in keeping with Du Bois's vision of an ultimate union of cultures, the "Sorrow Songs" represent an amalgam of music "sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard" (191) and of hymns displaying white, Biblical, mythic structures. In that sense these songs are truly a result of cultural syncretism and consequently cause for Du Bois to celebrate: "we have brought our . . . gift and mingled [it] with yours: a gift of story and song – soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land" (262).

Because the "Sorrow Songs" are also "the articulate message of the slave to the world" (253), though "naturally veiled and half articulate" (257), the choice of "Steal Away" is especially significant. The lyrics are "Steal away to Jesus" but the subtext suggests the flight to freedom. The fact that this and other songs have been appropriated and corrupted by black and white musicians, who "fill the air with many debased melodies which vulgar ears scarce know from the real" (253), argues less that the music "has been, and is, half despised" than that "it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood" and not recognized as "the singular spiritual heritage of the nation" (251). Finally, the appropriation of any sort of such singularly powerful lyrics, which "signify" on many levels and maintain an enduring resonance, robs them entirely of the stature they should enjoy. Clearly, in the conflict between white and black, white appropriation of black music is a colonizing act, and serves to undercut the potential position of black music in a cultural project such as Du Bois's.

However, within the matrix of cultural expression, music occupies one important element and written/oral myth another. In the transmission of culture, myth has a lambent quality: it registers its origins as somewhere in the mists of time and place, but it has the curious capacity to occupy a highly contemporary position of referential/reverential importance. Consistent with Du Bois's purpose, both Western myth and contemporary pastoral are fused in a poetics that subverts the white Plantation mythology of Thomas Nelson Page and others:

Have you ever seen a cotton-field white with the harvest, – its golden fleece hovering above the black earth like a silvery cloud edged with dark green, its bold white signals waving like the foam of billows from Carolina to Texas across that Black and human sea? I have sometimes half suspected that here the winged ram Chrysomallus left that Fleece after which Jason and his Argonauts went vaguely wandering into the shadowy East three thousand years ago; and certainly one might frame a pretty and not far-fetched analogy of witchery and dragon's teeth, and blood and armed men, between the ancient and the modern Quest for the Golden Fleece in the Black Sea.

And now the Golden Fleece is found (136).

In both "Of the Wings of Atalanta" (Chapter 5) and "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece" (Chapter 8) Du Bois applies classical myth to the meaning of the agrarian but rapidly industrializing South, capturing the mixture of beauty, energy, poverty, exploitation, and sordid commercial greed which had made up the economy of the Black Belt since the Civil War. The power of mixed metaphor, metonymy and allusion, the presence of "blood and armed men" in the above passage, illustrate both the seemingly endless cycle of the human condition *independent* of time- and place-specific coordinates, and the immediate relevance of history to the present. Furthermore, according to Butterfield, in lending the "significance and elevating power of a classical myth, Du Bois is asserting whatever claim the black masses may choose to make to the classical heritage of 'white' civilization on

American soil, by actively demonstrating its relevance to their history” (137). Significantly, this approach by Du Bois coincides with the potential loss, by the turn of the century, of the mythic quality of the “sorrow songs” to the black population at large. Partly this loss is occasioned by the distancing of a new generation wishing to abandon remnants of slavery, and partly the loss is prompted by that corruption of the music itself that robbed it of its “soul.” Yet, the “sorrow songs” (or spirituals, or Jubilee) had become internationally associated with the struggle of the African-Americans by virtue of the concerts performed in Europe by the Fisk Jubilee Singers and had, surely, begun to acquire those very mythic qualities outside America that they were in danger of losing inside.

I would suggest that Du Bois’s use of proto-European myth and his recovery in *The Souls of Black Folk* of the transcendent nature of the “sorrow-songs” with their African retentions and highly-charged cultural significance, represents both the intersection of culture *at the Veil* and the means of crossing (or even obliterating) the colour-line. As a demonstration of black literary virtuosity, *The Souls of Black Folk* aligns itself self-consciously with the writers of the epigraphs, with Swinburne, Byron, and others, demonstrating the ability of African Americans to produce literature comparable in “quality” with anything of European (and, significantly, not of American) origin.

The organic growth of the arguments in the body of *The Souls of Black Folk*, finds its apogee in the penultimate chapter, “Of the Coming of John,” “heralded” by “the strange chant” of “primitive African music in larger form” – “the voice of exile” (254-55). Du Bois chooses to present a synopsis of his major thrust in the dramatized unfolding

of a fictional protagonist/hero's (a)typical rise from the "dirt and dust" of his childhood to educated young man. That the black John of this story represents one possible outcome of racial "uplift" is obvious. In addition, within the conflicted responses of the hero to his various situations are embedded all of the history of pain and brutality of the black experience – the fallacious American confidence in the false promises of its own self-constructed mythologies, and their inapplicability to Americans of African origin.

The story is simple. A black, backwoods boy, John Jones, struggles to receive a higher education which eventually opens his eyes to American racial injustice. After seven years away, he returns home to the red soil of Georgia no longer able to communicate with his family and friends, seemingly irretrievably alienated by his education and his new-fangled ideas. His boyhood playmate, white John, has similarly left and returned with his prejudices intact, and his position in the white community unaltered. When white John (more from *ennui* than anything else) tries to force himself on black John's sister, black John kills him, and is hunted down by white John's influential father. Cornered, black John hums a few bars from *Lohengrin*, and is either lynched, or kills himself by springing over a precipice into the sea.

There are several interesting aspects to the story, not the least of which is the treatment of Du Bois's concept of "double-consciousness" in the doubling of the characters of black and white John (and white John's father, the Judge, and an old black lay preacher). The incident in which black John is ejected from a Northern theatre during a performance of *Lohengrin's* Swan is a masterful exposition of the Veil theme:

The infinite beauty of the wail lingered and swept through every muscle of his frame, and put it all a-tune. He closed his eyes and grasped the elbows

of the chair, touching unwittingly the lady's arm. And the lady drew away. A deep longing swelled in all his heart to rise with that clear music out of the dirt and dust of that low life that held him prisoned and befouled. If he could only live up in the free air where the birds sang and setting suns had no touch of blood! Who had called him to be the slave and butt of all? And if he had called, what right had he to call when a world like this lay open before men (236-37).

As in the "Passing of the First Born," Du Bois here evokes the desire to occupy some undefined spacial realm "above the Veil." Immediately after black John's euphoric experience, he is tapped on the shoulder by the usher, given back the money for his ticket, and asked to leave. The close connection between the theory of the "talented tenth" in education is obvious: it is the talented tenth, exposed to classical Western culture, who will lead the black man beyond the Veil to within hearing of the Swan. The style and content of the story juxtaposes and conflates "the music of the Swan [with] the 'dirt and dust' of Negro slavery and discrimination" (Butterfield 139), pointing to the possible, ultimate union of extreme states of being. But the story later undercuts itself by John's failure to reintegrate himself into his surroundings. Presented as the failure of the individual, the rejection of John and John's rejection of both black and white worlds are, in fact, not failures attributable to John's acquisition of education and experience, but to the failure of his environment to acknowledge and appreciate the new reality he represents. Seen in this light, the story of John assumes mythic/heroic proportions: John recovers his manhood, in confronting the status quo personified in white John, and pays the ultimate price. As in Greek tragedy, the hero's (fatal) flaw lies in his not having fully understood either himself or the implications of his ritual journey into the north and return to the south.

The creation of modern myth, and, I would suggest, the reanimation of much similar potentially mythic material from the slave narratives and before, is underscored by Du Bois's choice of Wagner as representing Western civilization. Du Bois suggests implicitly that the Wagnerian musical outgrowth of Herder's cultural folk project is the artistic and ideological equivalent of the black American "Sorrow Songs." From the ashes of the *Heldensagen* of Siegfried and Brunhilde and the fairy tales like Die Lorelei rose a uniquely German culturally expressive form. That form was a union of words and music and political will, conjured from out of a dim and distant, half-forgotten past, a frame within which the identity of the new German was secure and well defined, bolstered by shared beliefs and recognizable stories in which they themselves appeared as victorious and heroic protagonists. That this *volksidentität* (folk identity) was an entirely synthetic, orchestrated construct, spearheaded by a few Romantics who believed that Art was the key to Freedom, did not at all alter the fact that Germans could now recognize themselves, and, perhaps of equal importance, that this new image of themselves was shared by all non-Germans as well. *The Souls of Black Folk* is predicated upon the applicability of such a formula to blacks in America, culminating in the same result: the replacement of "double-consciousness" by racial self-consciousness.

But, in fact (or fiction), black John is ejected from the northern theatre by a southern white gentlemen (coincidentally, white John) and the northern usher, exposing the ongoing collusion between north and south to push the Negro back across the colour- (and caste-) line, and to perpetuate her/his servitude. This incident prompts black John, not surprisingly, to return home to Georgia. But it equally serves to illustrate that the

wholesale assumption of another culture (in this case western, white culture) is not only insufficient to create identity, but is, in effect, a denial of self. John's flaw is the assumption that, in embracing one culture, he must reject the other. Presented as a counterexample, this proposition undergirds Du Bois's vision of assimilation as a harmonious, necessary syncretic intermingling of two equal (but separate?) cultures. But even such a fusion remains problematic, given the degree to which the development of each social reality (but more particularly the white one) has racial exclusivity embedded within it.

On three occasions, black John engages directly with black and white myths. Firstly, he travels north to painfully acquire education as "the doubtful pilgrim" (230). Secondly, on his return, he asks himself why he struggles "against [his] manifest destiny," which he sees as the possibility of "settling the Negro problems" (238), of decolonizing blacks through education. Yet, he falls into the trap of appropriating an essentially white *colonial* paradigm of expansionism, subjugation and hegemony. His response to "the meeting of welcome at the Baptist Church," in which he rejects old-time religion and puts forward "in vague outline the new Industrial School. . . and detail[s] of charitable and philanthropic work" (240), suggests that his ideas are seriously at variance with those expressed elsewhere by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folks*. Black John's inability to connect with the black folk, his misreading of his position in a community dominated by white power, and his failure to understand the nuanced differences between accommodation, assimilation, and resistance all lead to his downfall. And Du Bois offers the final ironic reworking of slave myths in the scene in which the lynch mob approaches – John

tells his mother that he is "going – North." The pause is significant: "North," "Home," "Heaven," "Stealing Away to Jesus" were all synonyms for freedom. Du Bois recasts the north as holding no promise except death. This reiterates his sociological data in "Of the Quest of the Golden Fleece," in which he reveals the poverty and living conditions of the urban north, and in "Of the Training of Black Men," in which he highlights the commodification of labour, the regarding of "human beings as among the material resources of a land" (88). Both figurations suggest a kind of living death that is just as humiliating as southern peonage, share-cropping and convict labour.

"Of the Coming of John" may also be seen as an autobiographical excursion, inverting Du Bois's own life-path, one in which he would be "deaf to the voice of the Zeitgeist" (90). As an alternative to propositions put forward by Du Bois elsewhere in *The Souls of Black Folk*, black John's inevitable end is in suicide or death by the mob. In consequence, the fiction underscores the extreme danger inherent in following a path which fails to incorporate *all* the necessary elements for uplift, including those set aside (even temporarily) by Booker T. Washington. And the story drives home with greater effect the incontestability of the arguments consistently pursued by Du Bois. That it is a chapter of fiction, that it seems to avoid didacticism, also furthers the effect of demanding from the reader some *imaginative* response to the delicate problems Du Bois seeks to remedy. I think it is reasonable to suggest that this chapter *is* the conclusion, and that the final chapter, "Of the Sorrow Songs," is really a very special appendix, describing, explaining and demonstrating the intrinsic and extrinsic spiritual, cultural, symbolic, and practical worth of

... the Negro folk-song –
the rhythmic cry of the slave – stands to-day not simply as the sole
American music, but as the most beautiful expression of human experience born
this side the seas. It has been neglected, it has been, and is, half despised, and
above all it has been persistently mistaken and misunderstood; but notwithstanding,
it still remains as the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of
the Negro people (251).

Chapter 2

James Weldon Johnson and the Epistemology of Race in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*

The contemporary critical debate between Henry Louis Gates and Houston A. Baker that I described in my introduction, suggests that, after almost 100 years, there is still no consensus amongst black intellectuals with regard to the position that African Americans should occupy vis-a-vis the dominant white society. This is hardly surprising, since no community of any size presents a monolithic perspective. But at the beginning of the century, when Washington and Du Bois were jockeying for leadership, any division within the black community necessarily weakened the force of demands that could, as a result of a polemic, appear contradictory. For Du Bois, the appreciation and production of *high* black art and culture were indispensable prerequisites to the instilling of race-pride in blacks and to their acceptance by whites as full and equal participants in a future America. During the Harlem Renaissance, both Langston Hughes and George Schuyler focussed on art as a route to integration and its implications – as an expressive cultural medium for what it meant to be black or white. In “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” Hughes advocates that both black patrons and black artists should appreciate and work with their unique folk heritage, and not seek to find value exclusively in, for example, literature which corresponds to “Caucasian patterns.” Hughes castigates the black middle-class for aspiring to be “like white folks,” for adopting “Nordic manners, Nordic faces, Nordic hair, Nordic art (if any), and an Episcopal heaven” (92). Hughes was perhaps justifiably upset with an article by Schuyler that had appeared in *The Nation* the week before, and in which Schuyler states that: “Negro art ‘made in America’ is. . . non-existent [and] to suggest the possibility of any such development among the ten million colored

people in this republic is self-evident foolishness.” He maintains that the “literature, painting and sculpture of Aframericans . . . is identical in kind with the literature, painting and sculpture of white Americans; that is, it shows more or less evidence of European influence” (96).⁶ On the one hand Schuyler validates and confirms the principles proposed by Du Bois a quarter century earlier, namely that black artistic production should *rise* to the level of the best that Western civilization has to offer. But on the other hand, he demands that we accept his argument that the “Aframerican is merely a lampblackened Anglo-Saxon” like the “dean of the Aframerican literati. . . W.E.B. Du Bois, a product of Harvard and German universities”(97), implicitly denying that African Americans have a unique cultural contribution to make to the rest of the world. Four months later, in *Crisis* magazine (the organ of the N.A.A.C.P.), Du Bois responded. In his article, “Criteria of Negro Art,” he both elevates black literary production to the aesthetic level of great English romantic poetry and denies the value of both as forms; he reduces art to a pragmatic political tool, claiming that “all art is propaganda and ever must be” (103).

What emerges from the ongoing discourse, to which almost every artist of the time contributed, is not so much a discussion of art as such, but of the far wider question of how blacks are to live in the United States. When Du Bois and Claude McKay, or Wallace Thurman and Alain Locke argue about what constitutes appropriate material, or suitable themes for African American art, what surfaces is a certain anxiety about the authenticity of black art versus an art that has to accommodate white perceptions of blackness as they appear in literature or on the stage – has to undermine or reinforce stereotypes produced and perpetuated in the white community. And such argument was not unique to the realm of aesthetics. In sociology, for example, a similar debate was raging. E. Franklin Frazier and Melville Herskovits, for example, disagreed furiously on the subject of African retentions versus cultural homogeneity. And Herskovits went so far as to discover no cultural or social differences between blacks and whites. “In Harlem,” he wrote, “we have

to-day [1926], *essentially*, a typical American community” (354, my emphasis). At the core of this debate was the extent to which one may or may not seek to continue to see skin-colour in America as a marker of otherness.

In many respects it was Du Bois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* that provoked this re-evaluation of the Negro in American society, reverberating in art and politics, ethnography and sociology. His ambitious agenda which, as I have argued, revolved around the appropriation and co-mingling of African American and European mythic structures, initiated a vibrant discourse on art specifically which, I would suggest, acted as a surrogate for the discussion of one of the dominant myths that has emerged from Western, imperial, colonial expansion: that there is an *essential* difference between the races and that this essential difference produces a system of hierarchies and barriers. Although Du Bois’s intention was to dismantle the implications of this myth, his argument is nonetheless predicated upon just such an essentialist universe. James Weldon Johnson was the first writer to interrogate Du Bois’s position. His *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* enters into a dialogue with *The Souls of Black Folk*, offering a critique of Du Bois and calling into question the essentialist nature of racial difference, and other mythic structures undergirding the United States in the first decade of the twentieth century.

The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man was first published anonymously in 1912, and reprinted in 1927 with Johnson identified as its author. It is a first-person chronicle of a musically gifted, "tragic mulatto's" discovery of his "blackness," his failed attempts to integrate himself into the black community, and his ultimate decision to "pass" for white. The narrative is set in the period from the mid-1860s to about 1910. Throughout, the narrator interrupts the story to make rather superficial comments upon the social condition of blacks in the South and the North, and their relationship to the white majority. Originally mistaken for a genuine autobiography (which is, perhaps, the "practical joke on society" Johnson claims to be making) it is, in fact, a novel, a *bildungs-*

Künstlerroman. However, unlike the standard protagonist of the genre, who learns and grows from his experience, the ex-coloured man cannot learn, and is, I would argue, diminished by the events in his life, for which he is psychologically unprepared and unfit to encounter.

To judge by the critical response to *The Autobiography*, Johnson's "practical joke" has been hugely successful in eliciting the full spectrum of analytical reactions, often inseparable from political interpretation. Addison Gayle, Jr. stridently condemns both the narrator *and* the author for their "willingness to surrender racial identity" (94), taking at face value *their* statement that *they* have "sold [their] birthright for a mess of pottage" (*Auto* 211). Hugh Gloster, Nathan Huggins, and others, also feel that Johnson's narrator and his opinions are more or less direct reflections of their author. Yet, in the face of Johnson's lifelong commitment to black education, the N.A.A.C.P., and anti-lynching legislation, of his years of contributions to *The New York Age*, *Survey Graphic*, *Crisis*, *Opportunity*, *American Mercury*, and his real autobiography, *Along This Way* (1933), it is difficult to maintain such a critical posture toward *The Autobiography*.⁷ On the contrary, if anything, Johnson's response to the black social realities of the first third of the twentieth century was more nuanced than, for example, either Washington's or Du Bois's – and Johnson worked closely with them for many years.

On the other side of the critical debate, Robert Bone identifies *The Autobiography* as "a subtle blend of tragedy and irony" (*Negro* 137), an opinion shared by Edward Margolies, Eugenia Collier, and Robert Fleming, among others. But, to argue over the text's political authenticity on the strength of its irony or lack thereof is to do neither full justice to the intricacy of Johnson's design nor justice to the complex strategy which he employs to further his ends. I would suggest that irony (of which the narrator is largely unaware) is one thread Johnson employs to continually undercut the narrator's responses to the vagaries of his life, for it offers a means of suggesting to the reader that other, more

appropriate, responses to the narrator's decisions are available. Furthermore, the foregrounding of the narrator's anti-heroic and mundane stance creates a highly effective space in which his posture may be juxtaposed with echoes of antecedent heroic and quasi-sublime exemplars. The reader is, I would argue, expected to measure the Ex-Coloured Man's thoughts and actions with cultural paradigms with which s/he should be intimately familiar by virtue of a shared cultural sensibility. Such paradigms include all aspects of individual and symbolic black action, whether deriving from formal antecedent narratives or a broader, informal folk heritage. Moreover, Johnson expands the field of implicit comparison to include mythic grounds – what Stepto calls “ritual spaces” – and foundational artistic musical expression, which, as I argue in the chapter on *The Souls of Black Folk*, is a shared cultural apprehension, transcending individual or communal experience as a unifying codex readable by all African Americans.

Implicit in *The Autobiography* to such a strategy of comparison and contrast is the way in which Johnson “signifies” through allusion to such foundational texts as *The Souls of Black Folk*. This belletristic intertextual play determines the structure of *The Autobiography* as it becomes one of “call” and “response,” where the call is provided by the narrator and the response is furnished by the reader – a structure that ironically appropriates the structure of black religious service in the south. Johnson commandeers prior written and symbolic texts which he “riffs” and “rags,” revises, reverses and reinscribes, just as the narrator strikes up his “rag-time transcription of Mendelssohn's ‘Wedding March’” (119). It is fitting that there is an overarching contrapuntal design, since the point of convergence between Johnson, the author, and the Ex-Coloured Man, the narrator, is their knowledge of and interest in music. Ragtime is the presiding metaphor for Johnson's protagonist's racial self examination in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*.

In his discussion of Charles Chesnutt, Eric Sundquist provides a concise and

illuminating explanation of ragtime, and the ways in which it may be seen to occupy an important position in Afro-American culture. His comments are worth presenting in full, since they speak to certain strategies employed by Johnson, both in response to Du Bois and beyond:

Ragtime in its classical form was either a written music or one in which a relatively static regime of embellishment, not improvisation as such, was employed, and it therefore lacks central characteristics associated with the evolution of black jazz. The separation of the written and the improvised may be crucial to conceiving of the orality of the black aesthetic, but it would be too simplistic a mechanism for defining African American expression. *Ragtime in this respect occupies a middle ground.* . . . Ragtime at the turn of the century displayed striking syncopation, essentially the result of a transfiguration in African American culture of the march or quickstep. The "ragging" of standard tunes . . . or the creation of new ones with shifted accents and multiple rhythms can be likened to the broader act of *signifying*, the parodic appropriation of a cultural or linguistic "standard" by a differently styled voice (289, my emphases).

If Johnson's *leitmotif* of ragtime "occupies a middle ground" so too does the Ex-Coloured Man: he is somewhere between black and white, somewhere between Washington and Du Bois, somewhere between north and south, somewhere between freedom and servitude, somewhere between Europe and America, and, finally, somewhere between heterosexuality and homosexuality. ⁸ This perpetual state of equivocation, this sense of a character vacillating between choices, but unable to come down squarely on one side or the other of the "color-line," seems to be the defining characteristic of the Ex-Coloured Man. Various events in the narrator's life have specific and extra-textual implications, directly related to those "cultural or linguistic 'standard[s]'" (Sundquist 289) which should be read by the narrator and from which he should learn.

But the Ex-Coloured Man's problem is that he cannot read these "cultural or linguistic standards," nor can he understand their applicability to his situation. Early on, this inadequacy is made specific by the narrator's attitude toward the acquisition of literacy, particularly where foundational/mythic written texts are concerned. It is, I believe,

legitimate to suggest that *The Autobiography* pursues two divergent courses: one tracks the cultural literacy denied to the Ex-Coloured Man, and the other maps out the literacy expected of the reader, who is cast implicitly as the narrator's counterpoint. The narrator's cultural illiteracy encompasses all aspects of African-American artistic production, African-American communal history, white and black American religion, and myths of white America. It is this inability of the Ex-Coloured Man to read cultural markers as multivocal that directs us as readers to recover meanings which escape Johnson's narrator. As a child, whenever the Ex-Coloured Man "came to words that were difficult or unfamiliar, [he] was prone to bring [his] imagination to the rescue and read from the picture." His teacher "was sometimes amused at the fresh treatment [he] would give an author's subject" (*The Auto.* 9). And later (at age eleven), after learning of his mixed parentage and forced by loneliness "to find company in books," he discovered a "big, gilt-bound, illustrated copy of the Bible. . . . [He] was overjoyed to find that it contained . . . an inexhaustible supply of pictures. . . . [He] knew the story of each one *without having to read the subject*, and then, somehow, [he] picked up the thread of history on which are strung the trials and tribulations of the Hebrew children" (24, my emphasis). To the extent that these religio-mythic tales had been appropriated by pre-emancipation blacks in America to serve as paradigmatic pointers to the realities of their own situation, and also to demonstrate a morally superior position coupled with messianic undertones, they are inextricably linked to an imported mythic structure surrounding black freedom and future promise. For blacks "somehow" to pick "up the thread of history" suggests, at the very least, an imperfect understanding of the substance, meaning, and relevance of these religio-mythic models.

Among the other texts the narrator reads in his formative years, are Peter Parley's *History of the United States* (a fascinating volume by virtue of its omissions), Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, and Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. With respect to the last, the

narrator engages in a fulsome discussion on the heatedly mixed response that Stowe's novel has received:

This work of Harriet Beecher Stowe has been the object of much unfavourable criticism. It has been assailed, not only as fiction of the most imaginative sort, but as being a direct misrepresentation. Several successful attempts have lately been made to displace the book from Northern school libraries. Its critics would brush it aside with the remark that there never was a Negro as good as Uncle Tom, nor a slave-holder as bad as Legree. For my part, I was never an admirer of Uncle Tom, nor of his type of goodness; but I believe that there were lots of old Negroes as foolishly good as he; the proof of which is that they knowingly stayed and worked the plantations that furnished sinews for the army which was fighting to keep them enslaved. But in these later years, several cases have come to my personal knowledge in which old Negroes have died and left what was a considerable fortune to the descendants of their former masters. I do not think it takes any great stretch of the imagination to believe there was a fairly large class of slave-holders typified in Legree. And we must also remember that the author depicted a number of worthless if not vicious Negroes, and a slave-holder who was as much of a Christian and a gentleman as it was possible for one in his position to be; that she pictured the happy, singing, shuffling "darky" as well as the mother wailing for her child sold "down river" (41-42).

Stephens comments upon the Ex-Coloured Man's response: "if these excessively balanced remarks are meant to reflect the 'perspective' on life in the black and the white worlds that the Ex-Coloured Man supposedly gleaned from reading Stowe's novel, then we need not wonder why he is so tentative and embattled, or why he seems incapable of interpreting or 'reading' the significance of most events in his life" (104). But, for readers other than the Ex-Coloured Man the figures of Uncle Tom and Simon Legree have so insinuated themselves into the fabric of a sort of universal cultural recognition of things American that they assume mythic proportions, like the imperfect minor deities of ancient Greece. Surely, any interrogation of Stowe's fiction would have presented the Ex-Coloured Man with a remarkable opportunity for historical self- and family-examination. Given that he was born "a few years after the close of the Civil War" (3), his Georgia, mulatto mother must have seen and lived through southern slavery; and the shadowy

presence of the narrator's wealthy white father suggests that she was one of the favoured female slaves. The father is described by the mother as "one of the greatest men in the country – the best blood of the South is in you [my son]" (18). Certainly this hyperbolic description becomes a rather bitter irony later in the narrative, when the narrator sees his father in peril. But the identity of this "greatest" southerner is never disclosed, and his position within his society remains ambiguous. Even though the father (in the company of his new family) is later seen by the Ex-Coloured Man in Paris – with Johnson's nod to Du Bois – at Gounod's operatic adaptation of Goethe's *Faust*, and another opportunity for enlightenment is presented, the Ex-Coloured Man never discloses whether or not he enquires, failing again to probe and illuminate his relationship to the complex matrix of American society. But, then, the Ex-Coloured Man is a very unreliable narrator who asks the reader to "make up [her/his] mind to pardon skips and jumps and meagre details" (192). We must fill in those revealing narrative silences ourselves, to question not only the narrator's current and historical positions but also the pre-war narrative myths of the plantation.

The inability to read, understand or question myths from the Bible or the kind of plantation myths to which the narrator is himself inextricably linked, indicate the kind of illiteracy from which the Ex-Coloured Man suffers; but these religious and southern myths are by no means the principle texts to which we, as readers, are directed. Following chronologically, from myths of great antiquity to more recent historical fictions, we are alerted to slave narratives and narratives of uplift, all of which, I would suggest, represent myths-in-the-making – nascent examples of heroism against which we should measure the narrator's actions. Ancillary slave narratives are alluded to in the various journeys the narrator embarks upon. The first journey is prompted by his and his mother's separation from his father and her lover, when they are forced to go north to Connecticut from Georgia. As Stepto argues:

complete with its inland leg to Savannah and sea leg up the Atlantic coast . . . [the journey recreates] William and Ellen Craft's perilous escape from bondage. Moreover, the Ex-Coloured Man's trip south from Atlanta to Jacksonville in the cramped quarters of a Pullman linen closet is clearly an inversion (of nearly grotesque proportions) of Henry 'Box' Brown's celebrated crating and shipping of himself north to the City of Brotherly Love (109).

Elsewhere, similar allusions to prefiguring texts accentuate the protagonist's character and experiences in their difference from a "host of canonical images" (109).

The "subjects" of prefiguring texts, these "canonical images," though obviously preoccupied with the life of the narrator, are never *limited* to that of the narrator himself. Autobiography becomes a medium, as in *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, in which the message expands to include: the hero as metaphor, slavery, the relation of slave to master, and the Quest for Freedom, where freedom is both an act of physical displacement and the acquisition of literacy. In Washington's autobiography, the life of the man is subsumed by the political imperative to present a certain kind of uplift that is predicated upon a particular educational mode, the institution (Tuskegee) for its furtherance, and Washington's personal leadership. Though Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* breaks free of traditional black narrative, it returns, time and again, to the personal experiences of the "weary traveller." But, in the convergence of the experiences of the individual with those of the community, *The Souls of Black Folk* too gives way to broader communal, cultural and social issues. All of these texts depend upon a shared sensibility and cognizance of an overarching black history and pursue vital concerns of self-fashioning (both personal and racial), one strategy of which is to *arrogate* authorial control over their products. But when the focus temporarily leaves the narrator himself, in *The Autobiography of an -Ex-Coloured Man*, it becomes a pale and pithy perversion of Du Bois's examination of the state of Negro affairs in America, and serves more to act as apologia for the Ex-Coloured Man's pursuit of selfish gratification than any meaningful interrogation of his real position in the world of Afro-Americanism. In the Preface to the

1912 edition of *The Autobiography*, Johnson seemingly *abrogates* his authorial control (a rather wry joke, I think) in favour of “The Publishers.” Perhaps the most ironic “joke on society” of all is that the Preface does not authenticate a *coloured* man. Written in retrospect, as all autobiography must be, it is written by “an ordinarily successful white man who has made a little money,” who, by assuming such a mask, does not need authenticating. The Preface therefore serves to authenticate the narrator's *whiteness* in the eyes of white society, or, in this case, the eyes of the publishers. This validation of the Ex-Coloured Man's successful “passing” stands in stark contrast to his closing remarks of shame – and regret for “a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent” (211).

The “canonical” texts upon which Johnson places his greatest emphasis – those with which we are expected to be most familiar – are the three principle written texts mentioned above: Douglass's *Narrative*, Washington's *Up From Slavery*, and Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. Without wishing to undervalue the importance of both Douglass and Washington – and certainly in terms of “living legends” they are crucial to Johnson's design – I would like to concentrate on Du Bois's text, since it provides the most explicit source from which Johnson displays his process of “riffing” and “ragging,” of appropriation, inversion and reinscription. It is on Johnson's revisions of prefiguring texts that much of the irony in *The Autobiography* depends, an irony that resides in the differences between word and word, and word and deed.

In ironic “response” to Du Bois's earnest “call” in *The Forethought*, for his white readership to leave the “world of the white man, [to step] within the Veil, raising it that [s/he] may view faintly its deeper recesses” (viii), Johnson's Preface holds out the promise that “in these pages it is as though a veil had been drawn aside: the reader is given the view of the inner life of the Negro in America, is initiated into the freemasonry, as it were, of the race” (n.p.). The irony of this statement only becomes apparent as we follow the Ex-Coloured Man's initiation into a world both foreign and often abhorrent to him. The

narrator very much acts the part of a “car-window sociologist. . . the man who seeks to know the South by devoting the few leisure hours of a holiday trip to unravelling the snarl of centuries” (*Souls* 154). The drawing aside of the veil provides neither “initiation” nor any understanding of the “inner life of the Negro in America.” The device, then, of having a preface appear under the auspices of The Publishers also serves to establish an ironic distance between what *we* may learn from *The Autobiography* as opposed to what the narrator seems incapable of learning. In fact, at the end of his tale the narrator wonders whether he has ever “really been a Negro” or just “a privileged spectator of their inner life” (210). One wonders, then, whether it is not *we*, rather than he, who are exhorted by the Ex-Coloured Man to “study” and “analyse the motives” (3) behind the production of his autobiography, in much the same way that Du Bois would have us study his words, “seeking the grain of truth hidden there” (*Souls* vii).

The coincidence of language between Johnson and Du Bois, which Stepto suggests is “manifest almost to the point of embarrassment” (99), is most clearly evidenced in the former’s revision and reinscription of Du Bois’s statement of “double-consciousness.” Du Bois laments the fact that the American Negro seems psychically bereft of a “true self-consciousness,” having only “this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others” (*Souls* 3). The Ex-Coloured Man’s revision injects his own racially ambiguous feelings. Upon discovering his own “colouredness,” he says that, generically, the Negro “is forced to take his outlook on all things, not from the view-point of a citizen, or a man, or even a human being, but from the view-point of a *coloured* man. This is the dwarfing, warping, distorting, influence which operates upon each and every coloured man in the United States” (21). Nowhere do we see the Ex-Coloured Man’s sense of “two-ness,” though, by all the logic of his particular racially-ambiguous status, he should feel it most acutely. He does not. We must surmise that his newly-acquired identification of himself as a coloured man excludes any feeling of

Americanness. At the same time, to be coloured is to be not a “citizen,” and not a “man,” and not “even a human being.” Such an interpretation reduces and perverts Du Bois’s double-consciousness not to self-consciousness but to a single, stunted consciousness. Ultimately this consciousness cannot produce the harmonization and joint contribution of two racial groups to the future of America that Du Bois articulates so hopefully in *The Souls of Black Folk*. Rather, such singular vision leads to a perpetuation of the racial divide as two warring, irreconcilable factions, of which the Ex-Coloured Man stands as a living metaphor. We are, I believe, intended to read the Ex-Coloured Man's misrepresentation of the appropriated Du Boisian construct as his distancing of himself from that requisite sensibility essential to a full understanding of the racial reality of his time. In so distancing himself, he further repositions himself in terms of his blackness, articulating a fluid and amorphous response to be refined as the story develops. Far from being “embarrassing,” the ex-coloured man’s reconstruction of Du Bois’s seminal race statement indicates a deep-seated psychological resistance to an identification that would impose white conceptualizations of blackness as a frame to restrict and enclose the Negro, *even when a single-consciousness is as flawed as the ex-coloured man's*.

If this is a rather skewed form of resistance, coming as it does from a white man who resists being cast into a mould of a blackness that is anathematic to him, then the reader is obliged to study and “analyse the motives” which drive the Ex-Coloured Man to consistently pursue the *line of least resistance* when confronted by new situations in his life. These capitulations in the face of adversity and reversals of fortune draw heavily on three textual or mythic components to the black experience: symbolic texts, paradigmatic slave narratives, and specific aspects of *The Souls of Black Folk*. In particular, *The Autobiography* begins to interrogate the centrality of music, its importance to African American culture, and its appropriation/theft by white society, the last of which is a symbolic re-enactment of the enslavement of Negro (artistic) production.

We cannot fault the Ex-Coloured Man (or, better, the ex-white child) for failing to read the significance of the coloured bottles around his mother's garden, when he uproots them as a child. These signs of African retention – inverted as they are, since *this* coloured glass surrounds the living and not the dead of West African burial grounds – are entirely lost upon him. His retrospective on the incident leaves him only with the memory of the “terrific spanking, which indelibly fixed the incident in [his] mind” (4). For us, these echoes of a pre-enslavement history should be “indelibly fixed” as a reminder of the almost obliterated but nonetheless surviving vestiges of a culture that binds Africa to America, a historical reality that Du Bois was at great pains to legitimate. The Ex-Coloured Man's mother's garden and cottage ⁹ may be seen as containing both semiological meaning and the narrator in his first symbolic ground: the place of his birth, the place where he is loved and told “half-truths” by his mother, the place where his father assigns and affixes his (commercial?) value in the form of a debased, useless gold coin hung around his neck (6), and the place from which he is himself uprooted physically and psychologically, when they journey north to Connecticut.

This symbolic space is the first of many the ex-coloured man fails to recognize as such, and which Johnson selects in the hope that we do not suffer from the same blindness. With its red Georgia mud and gateway to the Black Belt, Atlanta is such a space, where the alternative visions of racial uplift are focussed by Johnson on the competing figures of Washington and Du Bois, and where the Ex-Coloured Man, his tuition money stolen, rejects formal education altogether in order to avoid the “shame and embarrassment” of being mistaken for “an imposter or beggar” or perhaps for one of the “unkempt. . . shambling, slouching,” “lower class” “of coloured people” (55-56). Clearly, this “perfect little aristocrat”(7) has little interest in or affinity for the lower class of coloured people. He finds in them none of the intrinsic worth discovered by Du Bois on this same ritual site, nor is he likely, as a white man, to cast down his buckets amongst the black folk, to

paraphrase Washington's exhortation in *Up From Slavery*. Quite the contrary, he stands "for an hour and watch[es] four or five men work to save a mule, which had stepped into a deep sink, from drowning, or, rather, suffocating in the mud" (53). Apart from the fact that this image conjures up that unfulfilled emancipatory promise of "forty acres and a mule," one cannot help but wonder at the Ex-Coloured Man's detachment. Is he regarding this sad scene through white eyes, "measuring their soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (*Souls* 3)?

So, Georgia, encompassing two significant symbolic grounds for the Ex-Coloured Man, stands in *The Autobiography* in direct contradiction to the significance of Georgia as a metaphor for both slavery and the potential for freedom and growth in the lexicon of black leadership. It should be remembered, too, from *The Souls of Black Folk*, that Atlanta stands as an object lesson in the seductive power of material prosperity over intellectual growth. From the relative calm of his university office (another symbolic site), where Du Bois can hear the strains of the Sorrow Songs rising from the young lips of his students, he invokes the myth of Atalanta and Hippomenes as a cautionary tale (77-78.) – a lesson unfortunately lost on the Ex-Coloured Man, when his Mammonism becomes ascendent.

The dual goals of making money and music dominate *The Autobiography*, but, where Du Bois seeks to elevate the spirituals to high art, to lay another brick in the wall of a substantial and communal black cultural mythology, the Ex-Coloured Man takes derivative black musical expression and seeks to exploit it *personally*, as both a black *and* a white man. Where Du Bois cautions against confusing the aims of earning meat with knowing "the end and aim of that life which meat nourishes" (82), the Ex-Coloured Man is driven by a desire not to be poor. This desire drives Johnson's narrator to seek employment as a racially ambiguous "Cuban" in a Jacksonville cigar factory. In Jacksonville, he displays another virtuoso performance of ironic detachment in classifying

“coloured people” into “roughly. . . three classes in respect to their relations with the whites:” the “desperate class,” the domestic class, and the “independent workmen. . . tradesmen. . . the well-to-do” and the “educated” class (76-78). But it is the “car-window sociologist” who neither brings insight to bear on these descriptions, nor understands what motivates the better class of black Jacksonville society with which he starts to mingle. The cigar factory closes, and the Ex-Coloured Man travels next to New York, to enter yet another ritual site: The Club and its “sporting life.” This is a place only of self-indulgence and ostentatious material prosperity – a place of moral laxity, of gambling, of easy-come and easy-go, in which money and music are conjoined. It is at The Club that ragtime becomes the Ex-Coloured Man’s means of expression, as he appropriates and exploits the hybrid music to provide himself with his livelihood. Occupying one extreme pole, The Club stands in marked counterpoint to the intellectual and “spiritual striving” so necessary to the well-being of the souls of black folk – at least according to Du Bois.

The symbolic ground of The Club in lower Manhattan is characterized by its domination of the past by the present, in many ways analogous to the way in which the Ex-Coloured Man's account is one that looks back and colours his experience from the position he “now” occupies as a white man. In the narrator’s description of it, The Club consists of several rooms, each subsumed by a governing motif: an aspect of past or present cultural activity. In the large parlour the

walls were literally covered with photographs. . . of every coloured man in America who had ever “done anything.” There were pictures of *Frederick Douglass* and of Peter Jackson, of all the lesser lights of the prize-fighting ring, of all the famous jockeys and stage celebrities, down to the newest *song and dance team*. The most of these photographs were autographed and, *in a sense*, made a really valuable collection (104, my emphases).

In what “sense” are they valuable? Neither here nor elsewhere does the Ex-Coloured Man demonstrate any recognition of the “value” of these personalities in terms of their contribution to blacks in America. Douglass is unceremoniously lumped together with the

“newest song and dance team.” Either we must elevate those sporting idols (whom America mythologizes relentlessly), to the stature of Douglass, or he must be reduced to the status of pop-culture icon. Finally, Douglass’s value is only that of contemporary coin, as the ex-coloured man is swept up in the material “brilliancy of the place, the display of diamond rings. . . the big rolls of money. . . and the air of gaiety that pervaded the place” (98). The Club appropriates figures from the past and present, situating them all in the present to satisfy the needs of that “multitude of those who love to dwell in the shadow of greatness”(105). But such a love is a hollow, individualized, and ultimately restrictive self-gratification, devoid of “communal resonances” (Stepto 106), and as far from notions of freedom or uplift as it is metaphorically possible to travel.

Literal travel takes the Ex-Coloured Man out of America. In The Club he masters ragtime, is rewarded by the nick-name of The Professor – another dig at education and professor Du Bois – and is “discovered” by his white patron, who uses him to amuse his jaded, white house-guests, and then “rescues” him from a largely fantasized sense of imminent danger, resulting from a murder in the club. In keeping with the general theme of reinscription and reversal, the Ex-Coloured Man is transported *eastward* by ship, under the control of a “mysteriously silent [man], almost hid[den] in a cloud of heavy-scented smoke,” filling the narrator with “a sort of unearthly terror. . . [and] possessing over [him] a supernatural power. . . to drive [him] on mercilessly to exhaustion” (121). The language is certainly more suggestive of enslavement and abuse than it is of succour. In Europe the narrator lives as a white man, even though the example of other expatriate blacks suggests that this (temporary) transformation is unnecessary in an environment where blackness is not stigmatized – unless, of course, it comes in contact with expatriate American whites. In Europe he is stunned to learn how ragtime can be appropriated and subsumed by European classical musical constructions. In his second resolve to become “a great man, a great coloured man, to reflect credit on the race and gain fame for [himself]” (46), he

determines to return to the “very heart of the South, to live among the people, and drink in [his] inspiration first hand,” for otherwise “what use is [he] making of his [musical] gifts?” (142).

The irony of the Ex-Coloured Man’s using of his gift to exploit, appropriate, colonize and enslave a music produced and developed by “Negro piano-players. . . guided by natural musical instinct and talent,” and become an “adulterator” (99-100) by imposing upon it a classical European stamp, is matched only by the irony of his description of other “gifts” given to America by its black community: “the Uncle Remus stories. . . the Jubilee songs. . . rag-time music and the cake-walk” (87). These are somewhat dubious gifts. The cake-walk enjoys a mixed reputation for being both an expression of resistance in “signifyin(g)” on white party manners, and as a degrading reminder of slave reality. Ragtime, as Sundquist's useful definition suggests, is already “the parodic appropriation of a cultural or linguistic ‘standard’ by a differently styled voice” (289). Located on an ambiguous “middle ground,” ragtime is an odd “gift” from the coloured people, especially when compared (as we are expected to) to that “gift of the Spirit” by which the Negro has woven himself “with the very warp and woof of this nation” (*Souls* 263). Furthermore, Johnson plays with notions of ragtime – which serves him so well as a metaphor for the Ex-Coloured Man – now as authentic black music, now as grist for white exploitation. The Uncle Remus stories and the Jubilee songs are pale appropriations and bastardizations of those authentic gifts that Du Bois variously describes in *The Souls of Black Folk* as “gift[s] of story and song – soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land” (262). In preserving southern tales, Joel Chandler Harris is to be praised and condemned in equal measure, and, as Johnson certainly knew and understood far better than Du Bois, the Ex-Coloured Man ignorantly mistakes the Jubilee songs and the Fisk singer's commercialization of “gospel” for the spirituals (the sorrow songs), to which Du Bois devotes an entire chapter.

No discussion of *The Autobiography* could be complete without reference to Johnson's segment on the Sorrow Songs. This segment is placed toward the end of the narrative, corresponding to the physical position the similar chapter in the *Souls of Black Folk* occupies. If Johnson's sorrow song section could also be shown to be an ironic appropriation of Du Bois, it would furnish an elegant addition to the pattern of revoicing and reversal pursued by Johnson. But in this section, Johnson abandons his rhetorical strategy and allows his genuine feelings to surface. To be sure, there are substantial echoes and parodies of Du Bois, as the Ex-Coloured Man attends his first, southern "Big [Sunday] Meeting," as he discusses the importance of the preacher to southern black life, and as he generally tries "to catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state" (173). Johnson even captures (and copies) the rhetoric of Du Bois when his narrator muses that "any musical person who has never heard a Negro congregation under the spell of religious fervour sing these old songs has missed one of the most thrilling emotions which the human heart may experience" (181). If Johnson's purpose is, in fact, to *bolster* Du Bois's precepts by creating a counterexample, a character whose ridiculous and transparent inversions must be measured against a worthy paradigm, then here, in Johnson's obvious expression of love for an act of abiding faith in justice and future promise – presented to the world as the sorrow songs, the soul of black folk – is the blunt and unvarnished statement of Johnson's intent.

But, even this apparent arrival at the core of Johnson's project is somehow unsatisfying. It appears to me that so seemingly simple a story as *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* is in reality as convoluted, multi-dimensional and complex as the entire history of black-white relations in America, and defies arrival at any fixed centre. Rather, *The Autobiography* should be seen as a nexus of ideas – a locus or repository of black cultural values. Despite his long-term close association and friendships with both Washington and Du Bois, Johnson formulated his own ideas. He was often critical,

favouring neither Washington's compromise nor Du Bois's increasing messianism, which was already present in embryonic form in *The Souls of Black Folk*. In fact, Johnson interrogates Du Bois's thinly-veiled ambition, by having the narrator in *The Autobiography* describe his first-born son as "a little golden-headed god, with a face and head that would have delighted the heart of an old Italian master" (209), and by taking issue with Du Bois's quasi-deification of his dead son "with his olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets. . . this revelation of the divine. . . [whom] we were not far from worshipping" (209).¹⁰ Here there is, I think, less irony and more of an oblique or even somewhat cruel warning that the delicate act of myth-making should limit the involvement of the self to the process and avoid its incorporation in the result.

Perhaps Johnson's concern is ultimately with leadership and the fact that leadership tends to polarize ideas, often losing sight of reality and values in the interest of demagoguery. Leadership is a notion with which Johnson seems to have struggled, questioning whether the assumption of such a mantle was "not largely mixed with selfishness" and whether it was wholly reconcilable with "a desire to help those [one] considered [one's] people, or more a desire to distinguish [oneself]" (147). However, Johnson's articles and essays leave no doubt as to his commitment in principle to the aims and goals of Du Bois – a commitment demonstrating Johnson's pride in his Afro-Americanism and his desire to further by whatever artistic, legal, and democratic means possible the uplift of his people. That white America was not yet prepared to give up the black "in his old character" is the "very fact [that] constitutes the opportunity of the future Negro novelist and poet to give the country something new and unknown, in depicting the life, the ambitions, the struggles, and the passions of those of their race who are striving to break the narrow limits of tradition" (168).

Certainly, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* was new. According to Stepto, it "aggressively invites comparison with major antecedent Afro-American texts"

(106). Johnson's narrative of a morally-weak, materially-oriented, idiosyncratic individual, when juxtaposed with these antecedent texts, serves several important functions: it interrogates the relationship between the life history of the individual and the racial history of a people, and it highlights the personal versus the public postures of race in America. Moreover, and central to my proposition, in adopting an ironic mode, Johnson's text undercuts the narrator's position and thereby strengthens the racial, moral, political, historical and, above all, mythic imperatives of a movement designed to inspire blacks in America to share a sustainable, communal belief system undergirded by a bleak but inspirational past and a promising future.

A final word on the subject of "passing" seems appropriate, since, ostensibly, *The Autobiography* is a novel in which passing is central. Johnson's ironic "riffing" and reinscription of narrative topoi is neither limited to the "tragic mulatto" of Chesnut's *The Marrow of Tradition* and *The House Behind the Cedars*, nor to later novels such as those of Jessie Fauset or Nella Larson. The tragedy of Johnson's *Ex-Coloured Man* is framed by the death of his mother at the beginning, and the death of his wife at the end; but the real tragedy *apparently* lies in the irony of his never having been a coloured man at all. His white benefactor correctly assesses the narrator when he describes him as being "by blood, by appearance, by education, and by tastes a white man" (144). During the scene of the lynching, south of Macon, the narrator stands "fixed to the spot where he stood," observing, in the *white* crowd, as a *white* man, the awful burning of that Negro who was "a man only in form and stature, every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his countenance" (186). Until the age of ten he believes himself to be white, a belief confirmed and mirrored by the society he inhabits, and by the cultural norms he has acquired. At the end of his narrative this "ordinary white man who has made a little money" wonders whether he has ever "really been a Negro" (210). This is really only the apparent tragedy of the *Ex-Coloured Man*. The reality of the *Ex-Coloured Man* is that he is a man – flawed,

imperfect, but neither white nor black. His value, and the value of the realm of ideas presented by Johnson in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, resides in a vision of humanity that transcends the base constructs of narrow minds and even the supposedly lofty designs of both high art and man-made myth, and in a vision of humanity that rejects any *essential* difference.

Of course, the political reality of 1912 dictated that in Johnson's ironic fiction, if the Ex-Coloured Man has "passed" at all, he has passed as a Negro. He must inevitably return to his white life across the "color-line." Only there is he visible, for he cannot be recognized, cannot be seen, as a Negro. To be black, as Ralph Ellison will affirm forty years later, is to be invisible.

Chapter 3

Sermonizing Blackness/Blankness in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*

Du Bois and Johnson were roughly contemporaries, and *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* appeared within ten years of each other. They worked together for years in the N.A.A.C.P, but, most of all, they inhabited essentially the same world. When their books were published, in 1903 and 1912, most blacks in America (and most southern whites as well) were still illiterate, agrarian and poor. In the forty years between Emancipation and the publication of *The Souls of Black Folk* melioristic change in the black community was painfully slow. Real change did take place, in the form, for example, of increased northern factory employment opportunities, but such jobs were largely reserved for white immigrants, except when blacks were temporarily employed as strike-breakers during labour disputes. To African American migrants from the south, for whom the north held so much promise, there was urban unemployment and poverty. In the south, blacks had essentially exchanged antebellum slavery for post-bellum agrarian servitude as share-croppers, peons or convict labourers.

Forty years also separate the publication of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and *Invisible Man* (1952), but the world now inhabited by Ralph Ellison was entirely different from Johnson's. Two world wars had intervened, and on each occasion blacks had set aside their specific demands for political and economic equality of opportunity, education and other rights, in the face of national emergency. On each occasion any expectations that blacks' contribution to the war effort would be valued and rewarded were disappointed. In the period from Johnson to Ellison, American communism, embraced by the majority of black artists in the '20s, '30s and '40s and once thought to be the panacea – the practical solution to the problem of racial division – was recognized as

demonstrably racist and, in any case, inapplicable in a United States engaged in a Cold War with the Soviet Union. From a strictly black point of view, the greatest change in these forty years was the transformation of a previously agrarian population to one which was, north and south, largely urban based and industrial.

The dislocation associated with urbanization – the pressures brought to bear on a given population seeking affordable housing, employment, education, and so on – necessarily gave rise to the formulation of new strategies to combat alienation. Certainly this is true of the literature produced in New York, Chicago, Philadelphia, and elsewhere in the north by the black *and* white writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Overwhelmingly their chosen themes interrogated either seamy, ghetto life or “uplifted,” bourgeois, black urban society. Johnson’s *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* prefigures these developments: he critiques both while focusing on neither. Richard Wright and James Baldwin, in the ’30s and ’40s, continue the focus on urban black America. What is striking, however, is that, almost without fail, the literature continues to posit a strong historical connection between northern ghettos and the rural south, which stands as a kind of origin. Practically all the major protagonists in all the major black literary works were born in the south and migrated to the north. In one sense this is not surprising since it reflects the reality of the greatest migration in American history – that of the more than 2 million southern blacks who moved north in the period from about 1905 to 1915. In another sense, however, this literary unwillingness to jettison the south also suggests either a misplaced nostalgia for an abandoned rural hell, or a resistance to the entire discarding of a cultural site of such formative and abiding significance – a site which could legitimately be conceived as the cradle of black America. However, though the writers between Johnson and Ellison continued to refer to the south as a generative site, they largely left their religion behind, relinquishing many foundational myths in the process. Did this mean that the rapidly unfolding macropolitical events of the first half of the twentieth

century and the creeping atheism associated with communism and the worldliness of city life had rendered meaningless that spiritual component of black life that earlier literature extolled as central to a black past, present and future? Was there still any connection between the Afro-Americans of Du Bois's and Johnson's time, for whom slavery was still a living memory, and their second or even third generation descendants? Or had some things changed so dramatically that, by Ellison's time, myth and spirituality in both the real world and the world of fiction had become irrelevant? If not, were the strategies – the invocation and restructuring of myth and ritual, which, as I have sought to argue, took place in the early twentieth century – of Du Bois and Johnson still valid for Ellison?

I suggest that these questions are central to any understanding of *Invisible Man*, and that Ellison answers them by invoking two of the greatest myths in the history of the western world: the myth of Creation, when God made order out of chaos and named and identified all things, and the myth of the “word” of God concretized in the text of the Bible. These and other myths – speech-acts of exhortation or rebuke – are the sermonic (oral/aural) transformed into the textual (written/read), at which point “authorship” undergoes a shift from a performative artistic expression to one that enlists and requires, for its force to remain intact, the art of a literary aesthetic suited to its meaning and dissemination.

It is this transformation of the sermon from an oral to a written text that Ellison so brilliantly achieves in *Invisible Man*. Moreover, I would suggest that Ellison highlights the sermon from two distinct perspectives: from that of its continuing centrality to black life, and from that of its corruptibility in the hands of those who wish to divert its mythic power to serve personal ambition. Furthermore, the sermon is ordinarily considered to be the vehicle by which the audience is “moved”; it is the frame that contains those culturally significant myths used to illustrate a variety of responses to the mundane, such as slavery and freedom, poverty and freedom from want. But, I would like to propose that in certain

instances in *Invisible Man*, the sermon itself becomes the myth it seeks to illustrate, or, to put it another way, certain sermons are in and of themselves what Stephen Henderson describes as the “mascon” – the energizing agent in the symbolic universe that issues forth from black American expressive culture.

To make my point clear I would like to cite two examples of “mascons” from scripture. The first, from the Old Testament, is Moses’s sermon on the Golden Calf, which takes place when he returns from Mt. Sinai, immediately after God’s command that he *inscribe* God’s words on tablets of stone. The second example, from the New Testament, is the Evangelists’ inscriptions of “The Sermon on the Mount,” which are to be found in Matthew 5-7, echoed in Luke 6, and again in James in the epistle to the Jewish Christians. Both examples present a *modus vivendi* – prescriptions for morality which, when enacted, have subsequently become affirmation of faith. It is the content of these sermons rather than the form which should dominate. Yet, the mythological quality of these acts resides precisely in the signifying power of the frame which, I suggest, is also the formal structure of *Invisible Man*. Both Moses and Jesus, the archetypal “weary travelers,” participate in textually reproduced oral acts, the details of which are invoked by the myth of the act itself. “The Sermon on the Mount” is the myth of Jesus’s ministry, and the “Golden Calf” is the myth of Israel’s special relationship with God. But it is not the words of these sermons which, as Henderson goes on to define “mascons,” “seem to carry an inordinate charge of emotional and [spiritual] weight,” but the “constructions. . . [that] whenever they are used. . . set all kinds of bells ringing, all kinds of synapses snapping, on all kinds of levels” (44). That shift in the precise location of the mythic quality of the sermon, the breaking of the boundary between form and content, is one of a multiplicity of teleological strategies employed by Ellison as a critique of the sermon itself. In certain instances in *Invisible Man* the sermon’s mythic resonances have been appropriated and subverted from a regenerative expression of hope and glory to a medium of personal control wielded by

the speaker.

Ellison's use of the sermon has specific resonances in the history of black America.

Noting the importance of the sermon, Hortense Spillers provides the following definition:

The thrust of the sermon is passionate, repeating essentially the rhythms of plot, complication, climax, resolution. The sermon is an oral poetry – not simply an exegetical, theological presentation, but *a complete expression of a gamut of emotions whose central form is the narrative and whose end is cathartic release*. In that regard the sermon is an instrument of a collective catharsis, binding once again the isolated members of community (qtd. in Hubbard 7, my emphasis).

Though Spillers presupposes the traditional/formal sermon, presided over by a preacher, her definition enables a view of the sermon as expanding beyond this formal limitation. The sermon comes to include a broader spectrum of speech acts which, in *Invisible Man*, encompass not only Homer Barbee's classical performance, but, *inter alia*, the white sermon to the black folk at the "Battle Royal," Trueblood's often reiterated narrative of incest, the Afrocentric "exhortations" of Ras, the dialectical materialism of Brotherhood speeches, Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, and even the dying Grandfather's family sermon. Ellison appropriates the black sermon, demonstrates its continuing significance to black ritual and culture, faithfully preserves its cadences and musicality, and uses it to exemplify a black oral and, in its conversion to a literary text, high modernist literary aesthetic. This artistic fusion of white Western (literary) and Black American (oral ritual) contributions to an *American* culture are Ellison's "response" to that assimilative amalgamation anticipated and "called" for by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*.

As I suggested, Ellison draws heavily on the Myth of Creation, the "in the beginning," the making of order out of chaos. This is clear/unclear in the "darkness of lightness" as the reader enters *Invisible Man*'s anti-establishment, reefer-induced haze and descends, "like Dante"(7), into the blackness and blueness of Louis Armstrong's music. The creation of order is itself chaotic in the narrator's surreal prologue, for "the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead." Moreover, before order can be created, one has to

understand the nature of chaos, a process of understanding undertaken in the very act of writing that Invisible Man attempts in the closed-off basement “in a building rented strictly to whites. . . that was shut off and forgotten during the nineteenth century,” at the edge of Harlem (5). The chaos that has kept “this nigger boy running,” the chaos that has reasserted itself from periods of false order and has “boomeranged him across [his] head so much,” has no beginning and, perhaps, no end either, since the epilogue finds him still in a state of hibernation.

In Ellison’s “in the beginning” there is no form, and time is a meaningless construct; history is thus collapsed into immediacy, occupying some indeterminate space. Invisible Man finds himself “hearing not only in time, but in space as well” (7) both the storefront sermon on the “Blackness of Blackness” and the lyrics of “(Why am I so) Black and Blue,” which, taken together, respectively begin at the beginning (of all creation), surge forward through slavery, and end up bouncing around the walls of the narrator’s “cave.” The narrator

. . . heard someone shout:

“Brothers and sisters, my text this morning is the ‘Blackness of Blackness.’”

And a congregation of voices answered: “That blackness is most black, brother, most black . . .”

“ In the beginning . . . ”

“At the very start,” they cried.

“ . . . there was blackness . . . ”

“Preach it . . . ”

“ . . . and the sun . . . ”

“The sun, Lawd . . . ”

“ . . . was bloody red . . . ”

“Red . . . ”

“ Now black is . . . ” the preacher shouted.

“ Bloody . . . ”

“ I said black is . . . ”

“ Preach it, brother . . . ”

“ . . . an’ black ain’t . . . ”

“Red, Lawd, red: He said it’s red!”

“Amen, brother. . . ”

“Black will git you”
 “Yes , it will”
 “Yes, it will”
 “. . . an’ black won’t”
 “ Naw, it won’t”
 “ It do”
 “ It do, Lawd”
 “. . . an’ it don’t.”
 “ Halleluiah” [sic]
 “. . . It’ll put you, glory, glory, Oh my Lawd, in the WHALE’S BELLY.”
 “ Preach it, dear brother”
 “. . . an’ make you tempt”
 “ Good God a-mighty!”
 “Old Aunt Nelly!”
 “Black will make you”
 “ Black”
 “. . . or black will un-make you.”
 “Ain’t it the truth, Lawd?” (7-8).

I am less interested in the obvious epic depth and lyric intensity evoked here as I am in the way in which Ellison makes it possible to turn concepts on their heads. He makes the sermon, “The Blackness of Blackness,” work in unanticipated ways, elevating in blackness not the chaos of an as yet un-ordered world, but the inherent ambiguity contained in the notions that blackness precedes a time of recognizable order, that it contributes in unimagined ways to the process of order and has, paradoxically, also created chaos in an ordered world. This apparent contradiction is wonderfully rendered by Ellison in the seeming incoherence of a text made coherent by the shared space/time sensibilities of preacher and congregation as they negotiate the dissonance of black reality in a world in which “let there be light” dominates in that creative interstice between a before and an after. These contradictions also signal a disjunction between reality and appearance, for if order is created from chaos – and chaos for African Americans is the result – then what do these terms mean? Ellison’s preoccupation with appearance and reality become more readily discernable after the narrative is complete; and the narrator’s statement that “the end is in the beginning and lies far ahead” forces us to consider

whether what appears to be a prologue is not, in reality, more properly a misplaced section of the epilogue. Finally, I would suggest that Ellison's reversals of accepted structures approximates Johnson's interrogation of the Manichean allegories inherent in American perceptions of blackness and whiteness.

As we read (listen to) the sermon in the foreground, we are implicitly expected to listen to (read) the lyrics of Armstrong's poignant lament on what has happened to the "Blackness of Blackness," since "light confirm[ed] [IM's] reality, [gave] birth to [his] form" yet rendered him invisible. We listen to Armstrong, using the power of light stolen from Monopolated Light and Power:

Cold empty bed –	Hm, I'm white
Springs hard as lead –	– Inside –
Feel like old Ned –	(But) that don't help my case,
Wish(ed) I was dead.	'Cause I
What did I do	– Can't hide –
To be so black and blue?	What is in my face.
Even the mouse	How will it end?
Ran from my house.	Ain't got a friend.
They laugh at you	My only sin
And scorn you too.	Is in my skin.
What did I do	What did I do
To be so black and blue?	To be so black and blue? ¹¹

Andy Razaf's 1929 composition betrays a sense of the extreme limitation of blackness, and has none of the implicit multiple possibilities of the earlier sermon. Beginning with the standard blues motif of "the woman who left me," "old Ned" recalls both the humiliating minstrel tradition (and the notion of masks rendering the wearer "invisible") and the faithful darky Plantation tradition" of Thomas Nelson Page. Thomas Marvin points out that "old Ned" "signifies" on Stephen Foster's "well-known song, 'Old Uncle Ned,' about a loyal slave who 'died long ago' worn out from years of hard work" (603). The juxtaposition of limitation and possibility is pursued in the scene of the "Battle Royal"—that sermon of the gospel according to the white establishment, that instrument of black

socialization, implicitly endorsed by Washington – where the protagonist has his first pre-invisible occasion to penetrate beneath the surface of things. That he cannot do so derives, at least in part, from his own naive exploitability, his complicity in accepting his white benefactors' vision of himself. The brutal Battle Royal episode is Invisible Man's initiation into the world of ritual and real humiliation, of desire and taboo, and of the betrayal of "the principle, which [the white benefactors] themselves had dreamed into being out of the chaos and darkness of the feudal past" (433). It is the same principle, the "greater ideal of the American Republic," invoked by Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, but the 'principle' is degraded when its symbol, the American flag, is tattooed on the belly of a "magnificent blonde – stark naked" (16).

In the first of several scenes of black emasculation in the novel, the narrator looks at the woman, feeling "a wave of irrational guilt and fear." She excites opposing emotions in the young hero/scapegoat; he wants "to caress her and destroy her, to love her and murder her"(16). And these emotions are matched by opposing similes, for her "kewpie doll" aspect competes with another interpretation that occurs to Invisible Man: "she seemed like a fair bird-girl girdled in veils calling to me from the angry surface of some grey and threatening sea" (16). In a negative mirror image of "double-consciousness," or the black mask of "yessing them to death," the dancer herself remains invisible, hidden not only by the "abstract mask" of her thick makeup but by Invisible Man's images of her, which oscillate between circus doll and Botticelli's "Venus." She leaves the scene, and the narrator and nine other black boys are blindfolded, and encouraged to "'Slug him, black boy! Knock his guts out'" (19). The payment for this (unwilling) participation in a re-enactment of chaos is in "good hard American" (22) coins, placed upon an electrified rug – and even some of these are fake.

What sustains Invisible Man in his ordeal is his belief that, despite all appearances, what both he *and* his audience *really* want is for him to deliver his revoicing of

Washington's secular sermon, the focus of which is that humility is the secret of progress. Amid the noise and haze of the smokers, with a mouth full of blood, Invisible Man mistakenly uses the phrase "social equality," a phrase he "had often seen denounced in newspaper editorials, heard debated in private." Perceiving that the protagonist potentially no longer occupies the space of humility and compromise assigned to him, the white patrons, whose attention has suddenly been aroused by this transgressive slip, quickly put him back in his place and satisfy themselves that "some day [the narrator will] lead his people in the proper paths" (25).

Momentarily, the protagonist has crossed over into forbidden (political) territory and been returned to the "proper" path. Earlier he had been tempted by the forbidden (sexual) territory of white womanhood, and soon he will enter the forbidden (social) territory of Trueblood, and be cast forth from the edenic confines of the southern college administered by Bledsoe. The process by which that "nigger" is kept running will begin. The Battle Royal episode has, understandably, attracted a large critical attention, but most readings echo Susan Blake's: "as a social ritual, the Battle Royal reflects the limitation of blackness in the face of white power. As an initiation ritual, it reflects the limitation of youth in the face of maturity" (122).

However, in keeping with my original premise that Ellison plays with *ur*-myth and the form and function of sermon, the Battle Royal becomes an extended sermon on the "fall" of man – the protagonist is, after all, literally knocked out to the count of ten – and a critique of Washington's complicity in that process. In mythic terms, Washington becomes the snake of scripture (or Milton's Satan), and his temptation of man is appropriated by the white patriarchy, represented by gods like Norton and the other "trustees" of Eden. In keeping "that nigger running," they at once tempt him with the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge and deny him the *independence* that should attend the acquisition of knowledge. Moreover, Ellison inverts another, related African American sermonic

tradition – the jeremiad. Wilson Jeremiah Moses variously defines the jeremiad as “a lamentation or doleful complaint” or “as a response to some present tragedy and a warning of greater tribulations to come” (30). But, traditionally, the jeremiad is a warning given to whites from the black pulpit. Here, I propose that it is the white directors of the Battle Royal who dolefully complain that Invisible Man has lamentably slipped out of the mask of humility placed on him by Washington, and that this present tragedy will indeed lead to “greater tribulations” in the future. Spillers observes that

the preacher through his ritual form of expression – the sermon – sings the songs of ‘a Fallen man.’ With its extraordinary synecdochic power, the metaphor of the Fallen man (with the full archetypal power of this religious paradigm) permeates black American culture. This metaphor *celebrates heroic overcoming and achievement*. In the process, the preacher articulates the complicated relationship in America between historical memory (jeremiad) and the American Dream (desire) (qtd. in Hubbard 67, my emphasis).

But in the Battle Royal chaos is created by the reversal of subject and object, as the white ministry subverts the black population. Invisible Man’s “achievement” is both mocked and severely restricted, even to the extent that – and here we see another of Ellison’s little black in-jokes – the protagonist must “shout” his speech. He is forcibly precluded from drawing upon those blues/jazz/spiritual cadences which would invest his oration with any cultural or ritual force, or locate it in any recognizable traditional space. Though Invisible Man shouts, he is effectively silenced – an indictment of the subversive nature of Washington’s Atlanta Exposition address, expressed by Ellison in fictional terms more forceful than Du Bois’s measured rhetoric.

Neither Trueblood nor Homer A. Barbee/Bledsoe suffer cultural estrangement in the way Invisible Man does, nor, for that matter, does Johnson’s Ex-Coloured Man. On the contrary, the Truebloods and Barbee/Bledsoes occupy a multiplicity of possible roles within the culturally-specific black preacher paradigm, including, as Spillers suggests, that of “leader/prophet, interpreter/hierophant, orator/actor, symbolist/healer” (qtd. in Hubbard

10). Trueblood illuminates what should remain hidden, and Barbee/Bledsoe hides what should be exposed, as Ellison manipulates representations of literal and figurative constructs of light and dark, vision and blindness. Between these characters stands that refuge from a prison-madhouse, the Golden Day, in which anarchy and chaos are the catharses for an insane group who have been “uplifted” and then cast down (like buckets?) because, to use grandfather’s phrase, “life is a war” (13).

The war Trueblood fights is against his own incredulity. As the representative of the “folk” Trueblood has done the unimaginable – and survived. He has “looked upon chaos and [was] not destroyed,” nor has he had “to cast out the offending eye” (40). Not only has he survived but he has further imaginatively negotiated his story into a commercial enterprise in ways consistent with what Houston Baker describes as the “economics of slavery” (*Blues* 27). Ellison anticipates Baker’s application of Hayden White’s injunction to consider “the different statuses that ‘literature’ has enjoyed or suffered in the hierarchy of value which assesses the worth of everything in terms of its exchange value for money or gold” (qtd. in Baker *Blues* 26). Not only does this foreshadow the protagonist’s later relationship with the Brotherhood (and of Tod Clifton’s final heroic act of selling Sambo dolls), but it engages in the entire discourse surrounding black writers’ representations of black characters – a discourse initiated by Du Bois, echoed by Johnson, taken up as an often acrimonious argument by Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Jessie Fauset, Claude McKay, and others of the Harlem Renaissance, and culminating in Richard Wright’s presentation of Bigger Thomas as a product of black *and* white cultural incompatibility.

Trueblood’s identification as a blues exponent in *Invisible Man*, his capacity for storytelling in the black tradition and certain aspects of his “sermon,” are illuminated by Robert Bone’s brief definition of the blues and a quote he incorporates from Ellison’s *Shadow and Act*. Though I have consistently sought to avoid the critical trap of relying on

Ellison's own "riff" on his novel's meaning, Bone's quote is useful. He explains that:

The blues arise out of a tension between circumstance and possibility. In Ellison's words: "The blues is an art of ambiguity, an assertion of the irrepressibly human over all circumstance whether created by others or by one's own human failings. They are the only consistent art in the United States which constantly reminds us of our limitations while *encouraging us to see how far we can actually go*" ("Ralph" 93, my emphasis).

Trueblood transgresses; he impregnates his daughter. He is temporarily exiled by his wife, Kate, and then returns. As Edith Schor points out, "Trueblood, by not exiling himself, is refusing to act out the white man's myth of guilt and pollution. . . . By assuming his role as family provider, he asserts his manhood" (61). The presence of Norton, for whom the sustaining forces of his life are his love for his dead daughter and his good works for the Negro, renders such a reading difficult to support. Moreover, the interest in Trueblood displayed by local whites, who give him gifts, suggests that Trueblood embodies a confirmation of the stereotype that supports their posture of racial superiority and validates the collusion of those "trustees of consciousness" (whose consciousness – black or white – is not clear) and their theories of humility and uplift. But, further difficulties arise out of Trueblood's self-authentication through narrative – out of his depiction of himself as a blues musician and old-style story-teller, and as the inventor of his own dream/reality. The "Sermon of the Field Negro," as I dub Trueblood's cautionary tale, is an endless loop of admission and denial, of guilt and purgation, of appearance and reality, and of order and chaos; all of which implicate Trueblood, Norton and Invisible Man as well as the mythic, folkloric, pragmatic, economic and cultural intersections between black and white, consciousness and unconsciousness.

In the tradition of Chesnut's "Uncle Julius," Trueblood is a trickster (a term Ellison only reluctantly accepts in *Shadow and Act*), in full agreement with Grandfather's enigmatic advice to "overcome 'em with yeses, undermine 'em with grins, agree 'em to death and destruction, let 'em swoller you till they vomit or bust wide open" (13-14).

After waking from his dream, and trying to disengage from his daughter, Matty Lou, Trueblood must “move *without* moving” (46), deny an act in the act of committing it. This kind of paradox is illustrative of the incongruity of Trueblood’s whole existence as defined in terms of his relationship to the world around him. “All of us at the college,” Invisible Man writes, “hated the black-belt people. . . . We were trying to lift them up and they. . . did everything it seemed to pull us down” (37). But it is the corporate black experience that Trueblood embodies that must be understood and appreciated before Invisible Man can emerge from hibernation. In the very act of writing, Invisible Man is adopting those paradigms of black expression that Trueblood fuses into his narration of the blues/story he recomposes with each telling.

Moreover, Grandfather, Peetie Wheatstraw, and even Bledsoe acknowledge the need for subterfuge: “Why, the dumbest black bastard in the cotton patch knows that the only way to please a white man is to tell him a lie!”(107) But Bledsoe’s admonition to Invisible Man makes no sense if “True blood” insists on telling the truth about the chaos he has created not only in his own and his family’s lives but in the context of wider social and racial relations; and incidentally, we only have Trueblood’s word of what that truth really is. Of the lessons that Invisible Man should but cannot learn, Trueblood’s sermon and his later encounter with Tod Clifton – who also tells the truth, but dies for it – are the most difficult.

In response to the Trueblood episode, Baker posits that “as Freud’s notions of totemism represent a myth of progressive social evolution, the farmer’s story acts as a countermyth of inversive social dissolution. . . . [of] his presocial and unaccommodated state” (“Move” 830). But Trueblood *does* accommodate by assuming a position of almost godlike creativity. From the inchoate *order* of a post-slavery and rudimentary, marginalized survival space, Trueblood escapes into the “blackest” sin and forms *chaos* by committing incest, and then re-orders chaos as an unconventional but stable construct of

the imagination. Selma Fraiberg finds that Ellison, by posing the question “Did Trueblood sin?”, has delicately raised the complex moral problem posed by the Oedipal myth.

According to Freud, man cannot escape moral responsibility because he alone is the inventor of his dream. Trueblood “is obliged to judge his own case, and cannot find the verdict. He is guilty-not-guilty”; the question is unanswerable and he

does not torment himself with unanswerable questions, and he cannot bring himself to atone for a crime that cannot be judged. . . . Trueblood became a hero because he refused the refuge of mind sickness and because his manhood refused the ax. He did not bargain with God in the wilderness but fairly judged his own worthiness to live and manfully returned to his living” (Fraiberg 652).

In Trueblood, Ellison has created a man who, by refusing the refuge of “not knowing” and acknowledging the unconscious motive, rises above the myth and reverses its prophesy. Fraiberg comments: “We are left to conclude that it is the myth that destroys and that the heroic act for modern man is the casting off of pretense”(653). The reversal of the Oedipus myth does not merely break down established order and reality; it reforms them by making man the clear-*sighted* moral center and morality the exercise of choice and will. Not only does Ellison provide Invisible Man with his second cryptic exemplum in the person and performance of Trueblood (the first being Grandfather), but he presents an opportunity to unravel in Trueblood a moral center which is in contrast to his previous experience, obscured by many layers of conflicting imperatives.

After Trueblood and the scene at the Golden Day, the shell-shocked protagonist returns the benevolent Mr. Norton to the college Invisible Man attends. Here, it is Rev. Homer A. Barbee who leads the celebration of Founder’s Day. Barbee’s sermon resonates with the audience as a shared experience of the Founder’s heroic efforts on behalf of his national black constituency, and Barbee combines “the best of celebration (style) and proclamation (content)” (Mitchell 5). Invested with cultural authority, his sermon serves to organize black social reality. But, in the context of a reality which in large part owes its

material existence (in the form, structure, and *principles* of the college) to the powerful white benefactors, Barbee must tailor his sermon with certain goals in mind, not the least of which is the validation of Bledsoe as the Founder's natural successor. During the course of his sermon, the *blind* Barbee stirs emotion rather than provides *insight*.

Once again appearance and reality are called into question. Certain expectations reside in the sermon, expectations which expand beyond the mundane concerns of Barbee and Bledsoe; the two seek to narrow the focus to a myth of uplift and a general conformity to the principles of the American Dream, while still creating the impression of a transcendent myth of "creation," in which the Founder and Bledsoe have been instrumental. They, too, have confronted chaos in "this barren land after emancipation . . . this land of darkness and sorrow, of ignorance and degradation, where the hand of brother had been turned against brother, father against son, and son against father; where master had turned against slave and slave against master; where all was strife and darkness, an aching land" (93). In attempting to present coherently such mutually exclusive designs, and to collapse any meaningful distance between the divine and the mundane, the sermon is so reduced that, instead of generating a unifying document that conveys a shared value system, it becomes instead *a ritualized myth of itself*. The form remains, resonant and recognizable, but it has been so emptied of content as to be simply a vessel, hollow and available to be refilled to satisfy the personal needs of Barbee/Bledsoe.

This degradation of content and appropriation of form finally becomes clear in the segment of Barbee's sermon that deals with the "start of the train, how it seemed to groan as it started up the steep grade into the mountains" (98). The train carries the Founder from town to town, but now, in Barbee's rendition, it assumes the dimensions of the train of God, ascending to heaven with its recently departed saintly soul. This is a revoicing of a classic black sermon, aspects of which Johnson discusses in his introduction to *God's Trombones*. The "Train Sermon" refers to a body of sermons in which "God and the devil

were pictured as running trains, one loaded with saints, that pulled up in heaven, and the other with sinners, that dumped its load in hell” (*God’s* 6). Preached again and again, the Train Sermon, like many of the classic black sermons, eventually took on the qualities of a frozen, or static oral text. Of course, Barbee’s use of this trope is specific, poetic and moving. As the train rushed through the night Barbee (not yet blind, apparently) and the dying Founder look out of the window and, echoing Du Bois’s metaphor for great black men throughout history, see “the burst of a single jewel-like star. . . streak down the cheek of that coal-black sky like a reluctant and solitary tear” (99). The chord touched in the congregation by the use of the train motif carries the Founder’s story beyond the bounds of the specific to, in Dolan Hubbard’s words, encompass “the ethos of black religion. . . that there is a God somewhere. Du Bois eloquently voices the prophetic and spiritual dimension of black preaching, where art and thought intersect in the spirituals: ‘Through all the sorrow of the Sorrow Songs there breathes a hope – a faith in the ultimate justice of things’”(15). Invisible Man still believes in this justice, since he has not yet been confronted by Bledsoe’s expressions of earthly power. But, more to the point, Barbee’s “signifying” sermon *is* the myth, the “celebration” of the sermon for the sermon’s sake, and the “proclamation” is hidden beneath the larger structure.

Though divine creation and the creation of the institution by the Founder are conflated, and though Barbee presents all the optimistic platitudes of uplift in the here-and-now conjoined with spiritual uplift, the ultimate aim of the sermon is to narrow potential rather than expand it, and to attribute potential as existing *only* within the frame of a borrowed and patently false American Dream which, in Barbee’s hands, is a suitable/desirable exchange for the image of God. He points to the white millionaires:

Here upon this stage the black rite of Horatio Alger was performed to God’s own acting script, with millionaires come down to portray themselves; not merely acting out the myth of their goodness, and wealth and success and power and benevolence and authority in cardboard masks, but themselves, these virtues concretely! Not the wafer and the wine, but the flesh and the blood, vibrant and

alive, and vibrant even when stooped, ancient and withered (109).

In the college (and according to Washington) such material success issues from hard work and clean living, and Dr. Bledsoe is the black embodiment of these principles. His, too, is a rags-to-riches rise from being “the best slop dispenser in the history of the school” to school president and nationally prominent leader (114). No longer barefoot and consumed by “a fervor for education,” Bledsoe is mythologized by the students and Invisible Man, who is, as Valerie Smith suggests, “unable to distinguish between material reward and moral virtue” (95). In a passage conspicuously lacking in irony, achievements and possessions are juxtaposed. Smith points out that

[p]olitical influence, leadership and Cadillacs are functionally equivalent; moreover, a light-skinned wife ranks as an acquisition along with these other “possessions”: Bledsoe “was the example of everything I hoped to be: influential with wealthy men all over the country; consulted in matters concerning the race; a leader of his people; the possessor of not one, but *two* Cadillacs, a good salary and a soft, good-looking and creamy-complexioned wife” (95).

Invisible Man ingenuously reveals to us his faith in a dogma that he soon discovers is propagated by one whom Addison Gayle describes as a trickster, as the “living exemplar of the image of the wily slave, a dissimulator *par excellence*, ‘a spy in the enemy’s camp’” (207). Invisible Man retrospectively calls into question the epistemological basis of Barbee’s sermon. Bledsoe’s self-serving admissions to Invisible Man make a mockery of the use of ritual, cultural/religious practice; he appropriates sermonic form and voids it of anything but self-serving content. Barbee’s comparisons of Bledsoe to Moses and Jesus Christ are nothing more than hollow assertions of Bledsoe’s worthiness to rule – and to rule with a ruthlessness that might mean having “every Negro in the country hanging on tree limbs by morning” to keep Bledsoe where he is (110). Even for Ellison, this is very black humour and, I suggest, contains his warning that the culturally embedded paradigms which celebrate heroic struggle and overcoming are not always used to advance the

welfare of the community. In Bledsoe, folklore does not nourish; it dehumanizes. Of Bledsoe, and of the black leadership for which he stands as representative, Ellison says: “beyond their special interests they represented white philanthropy, white politicians, business interests and so on ... they acknowledged no final responsibility to the Negro community for their acts and implicit in their roles were acts of betrayal” (*Shadow* 18-19).

Black betrayal of the black community for personal gain, material or otherwise, is not limited to Barbee/Bledsoe. Rhinehart is the master exploiter of his people’s imagination and vulnerability. Moreover, *he* is the ultimate invisible man, living as he does in the minds of those who created him – the literary incarnation of double-consciousness. Though never seen, he seems to be real; but in reality he never appears, and though, presumably, he must have some underlying materiality, it is inaccessible. Ellison himself goes further in ascribing to Rhinehart a position in the novel which touches the core of what I have previously asserted to be at the mythic centre of *Invisible Man*. “Rhinehart,” says Ellison, “is my name for the personification of chaos. He is also intended to represent America and change. He has lived so long with chaos that he knows how to manipulate it” (*Shadow* 181). Given this description of Rhinehart, I would suggest that the storefront preacher is equally one who has learned through cultural experience to manipulate chaos, as the form and content of his sermon on “The Blackness of Blackness” testifies. Furthermore, the preacher’s congregation is in lock-step with a process that seems to loop endlessly back upon itself in the rapid displacement of one state for another – order and chaos and order again. There is a poetry in the “Blackness of Blackness,” a rhythm, a contrapuntal design, a blues riff on life in the black ghetto. Similarly, Rhinehart displays a heightened dramatic awareness and a native artistry – as trickster, as magician, as supplier of dreams – in his multiple disguises. The very impreciseness of the storefront preacher’s sermon and of Rhinehart himself seem to support Baker’s cogent postulate that “Ellison seems to regard Afro-American folklore, before its translation into ‘more precise

vocabularies,' as part of lived experience. Art and chaos appear to be homologous with literature and folklore" ("Move" 832). It is possible to expand Baker's statement to incorporate the notion that the transformation of chaos into art is both an act of creation and an epic quest for meaning in black reality. This artistic journey, carefully differentiated by Du Bois from the materialistic "modern Quest for the Golden Fleece in the Black Sea [of Georgia]" (136), consists of the process whereby myth, religion, folklore and ritual are recombined and represented to the world as the quintessential product of a people entitled to recognition as full participants in the creation of an all-inclusive American order. At the conclusion of the novel, Invisible Man seems to be "moving without moving." He is still in a state of hibernation. His story concludes, like Douglass's *Narrative*, with the anticipation of the writing of the story just told, but in the writing and our reception of it, Invisible Man's creation is the text – a text that satisfies the demands of Du Bois and, it seems to me, answers with self-assurance the angst of Johnson's Ex-Coloured Man's racial equivocation, while still preserving the integrity of blackness.

Afterword

That various social sciences – including foundational work in psychiatry, history, literature, cultural studies, and other disciplines – have devoted considerable academic energy to the study of myths, is testament to the fundamentally important role such constructs play as paradigmatic sources of inspiration, and in community self-definition. The literary reinscriptions of myth undertaken by Du Bois, Johnson and Ellison, have contributed to the elevation of blackness in America to a condition to be proud of – an extraordinary achievement in the face of three centuries of externally imposed degradation and shame.

Mythic structures, “woven . . . with the very warp and woof” (*Souls* 263) of the black experience, have become entirely established, codified, and indeed glorified in much more recent fiction – in say, Morrison, Walker, and others, where they are made completely central, open to further reworking, expansion, remythologization. The public and popular discourse promoted by such fiction establishes the black voice as a truly constitutive and participatory voice in an ongoing American dialectic *still* preoccupied with matters of race. Nils Christie maintains that American blacks are increasingly exchanging goal for goal in a new wave of disenfranchisement. So, America is still a long way from Du Bois’s vision of synthesis, or from sharing a good laugh at Johnson’s joke on society, but, at least, black Americans are no longer in hibernation.

Endnotes

¹ The phrase appears once in Genesis 2:23 as a literal reference to Eve; and, again, in Genesis 29:14 when Laban speaks with Jacob and uses the phrase figuratively to represent kinship. The same phraseology is used by Fergus McIvor in Walter Scott's *Waverly*. As clan chieftain, Fergus is both identified as and identifies with his illiterate, uncouth clan members. But, at the same time he is an educated, sophisticated habitué at the court of France. Fergus's statement points to the conflict arising from such duality, and the need to remind himself of his own origins.

² A discussion of the problematic nature of autobiography is beyond the scope of this essay; however, the degree to which Du Bois manipulates personal history to parallel the history of a people suggests that he was well aware practically, if not theoretically, of the slipperiness of the genre. Nicole Ward Jouve remarks, "and you speak about the autobiographical voice as if there was such a thing, as if the prodigious wealth of recent studies on autobiography, first male, then female, hadn't endlessly questioned its existence as a genre" (10). Gadamer, Frye, Valerie Smith, and others stress the necessarily *fictive* component that inheres in autobiography by virtue of the subject's subjectivity. With specific reference to Du Bois, Butterfield suggests,

there is no bogus 'objectivity' in [Du Bois's] treatment of historical events. If personal narrative is important only as an illustration of the meanings in history, then the converse is also true: history is an extension of personal life. It is made by groups of persons in conflict, trying to create meaning and insure that their meaning will prevail. . . . When Du Bois writes history, he is narrating who he is and how he came into being. The issues are partisan; it is not until we take sides, or realize we have ended up on a side by default, that we become a subject instead of an object (140).

³ By contrast, in *Up From Slavery*, Washington's dedication is to his wife and brother, "[w]hose patience, fidelity, and hard work have gone far to *make the work at Tuskegee successful*" (my emphasis). Stepto suggests that this represents a "deliberate skewing of customary dedicatory language for the sake of establishing what are. . . the narrative line and authorial intentions of Washington's tale," namely, the validation of Tuskegee as both concept and institution, and Washington's successful work towards that goal. See, Stepto (35-36).

⁴ "Of The Passing Of The First Born" also incorporates the seeds of both the millenarian and messianic/prophetic direction which Du Bois was to pursue in later years. The description of Burghardt, Jr. prefigures the first-born at the close of *The Dark*

Princess, Du Bois's pan-Africanist fiction of 1927. The chapter in *The Souls of Black Folk* under discussion here begins with obvious biblical overtones, "Unto you a child is born," infusing Du Bois with the "fear of fatherhood mingled wildly with the *joy of creation*" (205, my emphasis). Du Bois writes, "we were not far from worshipping this revelation of the divine" (207) and "[I] heard in his baby voice the voice of the Prophet that was to rise within the Veil The world loved him; the men looked gravely into his wonderful eyes" (209-211). For a detailed discussion of Du Bois's messianic vision see, Moses 142 ff.

⁵ Stepto suggests that the "ritual of ascent" incorporates both the quest for freedom and literacy (29).

⁶ Schuyler's "The Negro-Art Hokum," appeared in *The Nation*, June 16, 1926. Succinctly put, Schuyler maintains that the influence of western culture on African Americans precludes the production of *any* uniquely Negro art. Both Hughes and Du Bois published strident rebuttals. See also, Schuyler, "Our Greatest Gift to America," *The Emergence of the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. Cary D. Wintz New York: Garland, 1996), 120-124.

⁷ Johnson's views are contained in his articles for the *New York Age*, to which he contributed from 1914 on. Also by Johnson, see: "Lynching: America's National Disgrace," *Current History* 19 (January 1924): 596-601; "Making of Harlem," *Survey Graphic* 6 (March 1925): 635-639; "Romance and Tragedy in Harlem," *Opportunity* 4 (October 1926): 316-317, 330; "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," *American Mercury* 15 (December 1928): 477-481; "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," *Harper's* 157 (November 1928): 769-776; "Negro Authors and White Publishers," *Crisis* 36 (July 1929): 228-229; "Communism and the Negro," *New York Herald Tribune Magazine* 21 July 1935: 2, 25, 27.

⁸ While, any psychological examination of the Ex-Coloured Man's identity crisis would, naturally, address his sexual ambiguity, a full discussion is impossible here. There is no question, however, that his benefactor – described as clean-cut and slender, as languid and even a bit jealous, as capable of "awaken[ing] a fresh emotion" in the narrator that makes him "very much confused and a little ashamed" (117) – appears to be the sort of sexually ambiguous bachelor that Eve Sedgwick describes in detail as participating fully in the homosocial (188-212).

⁹ My argument, and that of Stepto, though emphasizing different aspects of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, converge in terms of ways in which Johnson imagistically appropriates antislavery literature. Here, Stepto discusses

homes and how they prefigure other features in *The Autobiography* in order to demonstrate the extent to which Johnson has borrowed a particular legacy from antislavery literature, elaborated upon its implications and potential narrative strategies, and set it in motion within the bounds of his text. The legacy to which I refer is the haunting image of the snug cottage in the clearing. To cite two examples, that cottage is the lure forsaken by Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) when she refuses to submit to the lecherous Dr. Flint in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and it is the payment (one hopes only the down payment) received by Henry Bibb's wife near the end of his narrative, once she becomes her master's favoured concubine and in that way halts, once and for all, Bibb's valiant forays into slave territory in quest of her deliverance. While the construction of this image in antislavery literature rarely goes beyond the literal assembly of such cottages (after all, one need not cross the portals or light the hearth to envision the moral sore that festers there), Johnson's constructions begin with the cottages not only finished and furnished, but also inhabited, both by the kept woman and by the inevitable issue of her protracted liaison. His purpose is not to expose this once common or tacitly accepted persuasion among males of the South's "best blood," but to accept that persuasion as what Du Bois would call an unvarnished fact of life along the color line and then assign to it, in the course of a fresh narrative, those human complexities that it will undoubtedly bear (and bare), including certain modal expressions of relations between master and slave, their children, and those children's children as well. In this way the Ex-Coloured Man's boyhood homes do not so much echo as recast a primary trope in antislavery literature (103-104).

¹⁰ I have to assume that the coincidence of page numbers in which these two accounts of the Ex-Coloured Man's and Du Bois's children occur in their respective texts is simply serendipitous.

¹¹ Lyrics transcribed from Louis Armstrong's recording of the song on *Louis Armstrong's Greatest Hits*, Columbia, PC 9438, 1967. Line breaks indicate Armstrong's pauses. Lyrics by Andy Razaf, ©1929.

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Endnotes

1. The phrase appears once in Genesis 2:23 as a literal reference to Eve; and, again, in Genesis 29:14 when Laban speaks with Jacob and uses the phrase figuratively to represent kinship. The same phraseology is used by Fergus McIvor in Walter Scott's *Waverly*. As clan chieftain, Fergus is both identified as and identifies with his illiterate, uncouth clan members. But, at the same time he is an educated, sophisticated habitué at the court of France. Fergus's statement points to the conflict arising from such duality, and the need to remind himself of his own origins.
2. Discussion of the problematic nature of autobiography is beyond the scope of this essay, however, the degree to which Du Bois manipulates personal history to parallel the history of a people suggests that he was well aware practically, if not theoretically, of the slippery nature of that genre. Nicole Ward Jouve remarks, "and you speak about the autobiographical voice as if there was such a thing, as if the prodigious wealth of recent studies on autobiography, first male, then female, hadn't endlessly questioned its existence as a genre" (10). Gadamer, Frye, Valerie Smith, and others stress the necessarily *fictive* component that inheres in autobiography by virtue of the subject's subjectivity. With specific reference to Du Bois, Butterfield suggests, "there is no bogus 'objectivity' in [Du Bois's] treatment of historical events. If personal narrative is important only as an illustration of the meanings in history, then the converse is also true: history is an extension of personal life. It is made by groups of persons in conflict, trying to create meaning and insure that their meaning will prevail. . . . When Du Bois writes history, he is narrating who he is and how he came into being. The issues are partisan; it is not until we take sides, or realize we have ended up on a side by default, that we become a subject instead of an object" (Butterfield, 140).
3. By contrast, in *Up From Slavery*, Washington's dedication is to his wife and brother "Whose patience, fidelity, and hard work have gone far to *make the work at Tuskegee successful*" (My emphasis). Stepto suggests that this represents a "deliberate skewing of customary dedicatory language for the sake of establishing what are. . . the narrative line and authorial intentions of Washington's tale," namely, the validation of Tuskegee as both concept and institution, and Washington's successful work towards that goal. See, Stepto 35-36).
4. "Of The Passing Of The First Born" also incorporates the seeds of both the millenarian and messianic/prophetic direction which Du Bois was to pursue in later years. The description of Burghardt, Jr. prefigures the first-born at the close of *The Dark Princess*, Du Bois's pan-Africanist fiction of 1927. The chapter in *The Souls* under discussion here begins with obvious biblical overtones, "Unto you a child is born," infusing Du Bois with "fear of fatherhood mingled with the *joy of creation*" (my emphasis). Du Bois writes, "we were not far from worshipping this revelation of the divine" (207) and "[I] heard in his

baby voice the voice of the Prophet that was to rise within the Veil The world loved him; the men looked gravely into his wonderful eyes" (209-211). For a detailed discussion of Du Bois's messianic vision see, Moses 142 ff.

5. Stepto suggests that the "ritual of ascent" incorporates both the quest for freedom *and* literacy (29).
6. George S. Schuyler's "The Negro-Art Hokum," first appeared in *The Nation*, June 16, 1926. Succinctly put, Schuyler maintains that the influence of western culture on African Americans precludes the production of *any* uniquely Negro art. Both Hughes and Du Bois published strident rebuttals. See also, Schuyler, "Our Greatest Gift to America" (Wintz 120-124).
7. The views of James Weldon Johnson are contained in his articles for the *New York Age* to which he contributed from 1914 on. Also by Johnson, see: "Lynching: America's National Disgrace," *Current History*, 19 (January 1924): 596-601; "Making of Harlem," *Survey Graphic*, 6 (March 1925): 635-639; "Romance and Tragedy in Harlem," *Opportunity*, 4 (October 1926): 316-317, 330; "The Dilemma of the Negro Author," *American Mercury*, 15 (December 1928): 477-481; "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," *Harper's*, 157 (November 1928): 769-776; "Negro Authors and White Publishers," *Crisis*, 36 (July 1929): 228-229; "Communism and the Negro," *New York Herald Tribune Magazine*, 21 July 1935, pp. 2, 25, 27.
8. While, from the point of view of a psychological understanding of the depth of the identity crisis suffered by the ex-coloured man, his sexual ambiguity adds dimension, a full discussion is impossible here. As an adolescent, he was subject to "fits of sentimental hysteria" (*Auto* 27). Certainly, he is engaged twice and married once, but his first engagement (when a cigar-maker in Jacksonville) is introduced and ended in a sentence, whereas his relationship with his white, older benefactor consumes 33 pages (116-148) and the language used, though not explicit, is certainly suggestive. Described as "clean-cut, slender" and youthful-looking had it not been for the "tinge of grey about his temples," a man who sat "languidly puffing cigarettes," the benefactor helps his friends find "happiness in novelty. . . exhausting every resource. . . that might possibly furnish a new sensation or awaken a fresh emotion." And yet, at the same time the ex-coloured man awakens "very much confused and a little ashamed" (117). The benefactor sits "mysteriously silent, almost hid[den] in a cloud of heavy-scented smoke" filling the narrator with "a sort of unearthly terror. . . possessing over me a supernatural power. . . to drive me on mercilessly to exhaustion. . . [but] these feelings came very rarely; besides, he paid me so liberally I could forget much"(121). They travel together to France, and, here, consistent with the ambiguity of the use of the term in French and German, the benefactor becomes the narrator's "friend" and there develops between them feelings which are "familiar and warm," the narrator noting that his benefactor "had a decided personal liking for me"(132). There are numerous other instances of the use of equivocal language to describe the interrelationship.

9. *Nicola: the following is all one long (very long) quote from Stepto. I think it is interesting – it reinforces the appropriation of myth that I discuss elsewhere. But, I do not deal with these specifics, so that's why I include this quote as an endnote. Shall I dump it ???*
(But, I am flattered that you should think I might (conceivably) have written this as well as R.S.)

My argument, and that of Stepto, though emphasizing different aspects of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, converge in terms of ways in which Johnson imagistically appropriates antislavery literature. Here, Stepto discusses "homes and how they prefigure other features in *The Autobiography* in order to demonstrate the extent to which Johnson has borrowed a particular legacy from antislavery literature, elaborated upon its implications and potential narrative strategies, and set it in motion within the bounds of his text. The legacy to which I refer is the haunting image of the snug cottage in the clearing. To cite two examples, that cottage is the lure forsaken by Linda Brent (Harriet Jacobs) when she refuses to submit to the lecherous Dr. Flint in *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and it is the payment (one hopes only the down payment) received by Henry Bibb's wife near the end of his narrative, once she becomes her master's favoured concubine and in that way halts, once and for all, Bibb's valiant forays into slave territory in quest of her deliverance. While the construction of this image in antislavery literature rarely goes beyond the literal assembly of such cottages (after all, one need not cross the portals or light the hearth to envision the moral sore that festers there), Johnson's constructions begin with the cottages not only finished and furnished, but also inhabited, both by the kept woman and by the inevitable issue of her protracted liaison. His purpose is not to expose this once common or tacitly accepted persuasion among males of the South's 'best blood,' but to accept that persuasion as what Du Bois would call an unvarnished fact of life along the color line and then assign to it, in the course of a fresh narrative, those human complexities that it will undoubtedly bear (and bare), including certain modal expressions of relations between master and slave, their children, and those children's children as well. In this way the Ex-Coloured Man's boyhood homes do not so much echo as recast a primary trope in antislavery literature." See, Stepto 103-104.

10. I have to assume that the coincidence of page numbers in which these two accounts of the ex-coloured man's and Du Bois's children occur is simply serendipitous.
11. Lyrics transcribed from Louis Armstrong's recording of the song on *Louis Armstrong's Greatest Hits*, Columbia, PC 9438, 1967. Line breaks indicate Armstrong's pauses. Lyrics by Andy Razaf, ©1929.